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DESCENT INTO THE MAELSTROM



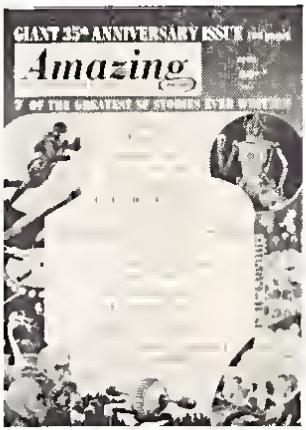
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FANTASTIC, Stories of Imagination, Vol. 10, No. 4, April 1961, is published monthly by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, William B. Ziff, Chairman of the Board (1946-1953) at 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Illinois. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, Illinois and at additional mailing offices. Subscription rates: U. S. and possessions and Canada $3.50 for 12 issues; Pan American Union Countries $4.00; all other foreign countries $4.50.

FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

APRIL 1961
Volume 10 Number 4

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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NOVELET

DESCENT INTO THE MAELSTROM
By Daniel F. Galouye 6

SHORT STORIES

THE VIOLIN STRING
By Henry Hasse 47

MULBERRY MOON
By Arthur Porges 59

DISCOVERERS
By Henry Slesar 68

SERIAL

WORLDS OF THE IMPERIUM
By Keith Laumer 78
(Conclusion)

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

ACCORDING TO YOU 126

COMING NEXT MONTH 77

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; H. B. Sarbin, Vice President; Charles Housman, Financial Vice President; Richard Kislik, Treasurer.

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FA-41



EDITORIAL

THE new sciences involved in such forward-looking fields as space exploration and solid-state physics are showing surprising versatility. One of their most important by-products seems to be vastly improved methods of searching the ancient past.

Tests have shown that accurate dating of natural objects or artifacts can be carried back accurately as far as several hundred thousand years—and this, say the experts, is only the beginning. The value of these devices that see into the past is manifold. We can now trace an object back to the time and place of its origin or creation. We can find long-buried ruins; trace ancient trading routes; solve problems that have verged on myth and legend.

For example, scientists now know that Bronze Age implements found in Britain were made of metal from Central European mines. The golden objects of the Aztecs came from mines in Colombia, South America—perhaps hinting at the long-suspected link between Aztecs and Mayans.

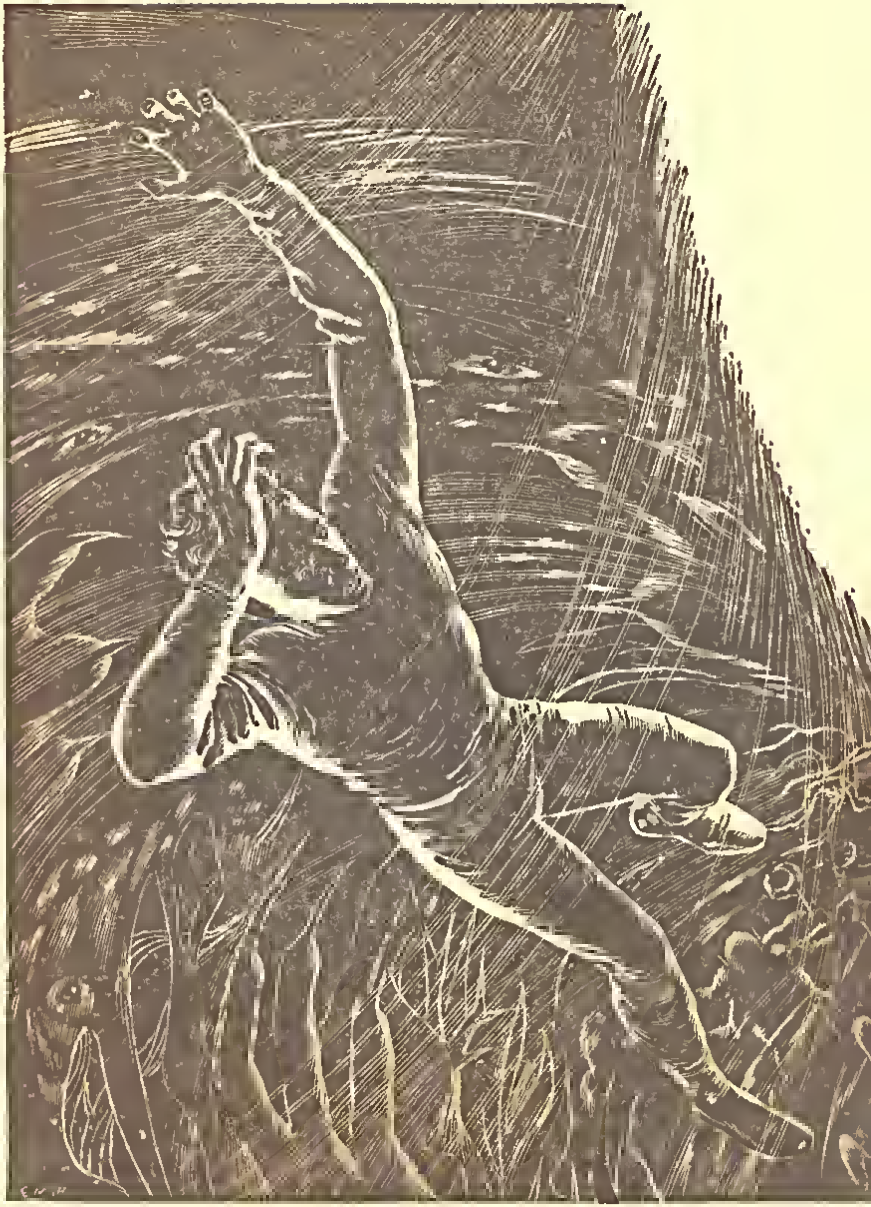
What are some of the new dating techniques?

1—*magnetic dating.* When pottery or glass is baked, the direction of the earth's magnet field is "fixed" into it. The angle of this field varies each year at the same site. By spinning the object on a turntable driven by a non-magnetic shaft, one obtains a current that reveals the angle of the original magnetic field. The age of the object can then be computed to within 25 years.

2—*neutron activation.* If a neutron beam bombards a spot on an object the elements there become radioactive. As the radioactivity decays scientists can tell the composition of the object down to trace elements, and thus sort out items according to their points of origin.

3—*thermoluminescence.* When an object with a crystalline structure is heated, electrons which have been "trapped" inside it are freed, and give off a characteristic glow. The extent of the glow varies minutely but precisely according to the length of time that has passed since the object was baked or fired. Potsherds from Athens were dated by this technique back to 900 B.C. Thermoluminescence seems to be valid back at least 500,000 years—much farther back in time than Carbon-14 dating can go with any accuracy at all! —N. L.

Illustrator EMSH



There was but one way to reach Centauri. A little girl must grow up in frantic isolation. And three men must make their impossible . . .

DESCENT INTO THE MAELSTROM

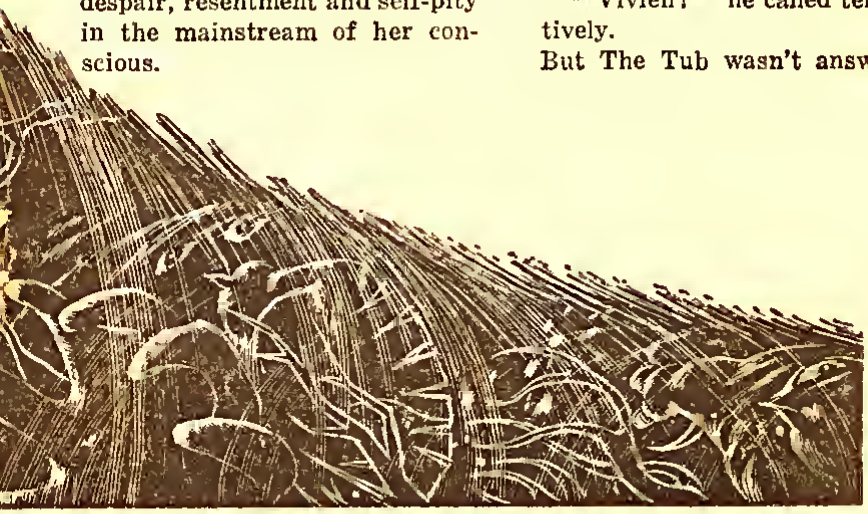
BY DANIEL F. GALOUYE

THE Tub was surly and fretful. And, as if that weren't enough, Bruce Craig could also sense vague undercurrents of despair, resentment and self-pity in the mainstream of her conscious.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't be that mindful of her inner emotions. But the bond of direct communication had become stronger over the years.

Vivien? he called tentatively.

But The Tub wasn't answer-



ing. He could almot feel the disdaining pressure of her indifference.

Outside (he had come more and more to think of the vast, objective world as something "outside" his realm of experience) the solarium was warm and serene, its broad windows opening on an undulant, sunwashed countryside.

Vivien!

::Leave me alone.::

Look, Tub. We don't have to be at each other's throat.

::They say the less I have to do with you the easier it'll be. And don't call me Tub!::

We've called you that for eight years.

::Things are different. The flight's over. I'm no longer a naive twelve-year-old, like I was when it started. And I don't want to be called Tub. It's stupid and vulgar.::

//Rub-a-dub-dub. Rub-a-dub-dub.// Craig recognized the sardonic tenor behind the thought. It was Gottweld, the nucleonist. //Three men in a tub. Tip the tub and what've you got? A sub, bub. Rub-a-dub-dub.//

Gottweld was cracking up fast. But that was as it should be. He was the oldest (forty-six by now, Craig calculated, thinking back over the impossible eight years). And the institution was concentrating on him first.

The derisive taunts had faded for a moment, but now they were coming back strong in the communal thought stream—strong and depraved.

//Rub-a-dub-dub. Sink the sub. Free the three from tbe central hub. Rub-a-dub-dub. Rub—//

##Damn you, shut up! ##Paulson, the pilot, exploded. ##I've had all I can stand!##

//All you can stand, man? But we'll all be nothing in the flick of a hand!//

Gottweld and Paulson faded out, withdrawing into their shells.

Vivien, Craig was suddenly aware, was sobbing. Her hands came up to cover her face and draw a curtain of darkness over his vision. Momentarily he felt a pang of compassion. And he wished that he was a real person of fleshy substance and physical form so he could sit beside her and reassure her.

But he rejected the maudlin thought. Such sentiment was only hypocritical. He couldn't escape the basic premise that only by subduing the personality that was Vivien Walters, The Tub, could he continue to exist.

**Vivien," he tried softly, forcing her hands away from her face and letting the warm light flood into her eyes.

::What do you want?::

You think there'll be another session?

::We're scheduled for one a day, aren't we?::

One a day—inevitably, inexorably, inescapably.

Tell them you don't feel up to it, he pleaded.

::Why should I?::

He bristled. **Because they're going to destroy three men! And you're helping them!**

He sensed it—a brief surge of doubt and solicitude. But she shrugged it off instantly.

::Can't you understand, Bruce, that you've got to be erased? You've served a purpose. But it's over now. And I've a right to a free, normal life.::

Haven't I as much a right? Hasn't Gottweld? Paulson?

::No. You're just impresses—bundles of thoughts and motives and desires. But you aren't real. You're only reflections of real persons, created for a specific job. The job's over. The impresses have to be removed.::

"Miss Walters."

Vivien looked up and Craig shared her glance at the nurse who stood before them in the doorway.

"Dr. Dorfman's ready now," she announced.

DORFMAN was a slim, anxious man whose hollow habit of sliding a hand up and back from his forehead seemed to suggest how he had lost his hair.

He indulged the habit disconcertingly as he sat facing The Tub. To Craig, it betrayed immoderate nervousness and determination.

"Now, Miss Walters," the psychiatrist proposed, "suppose you just relax and let me take over. We'll continue with erasure . . . Gentlemen?"

The girl's lips remained motionless. Craig made no effort to move them himself.

Dorfman shifted impatiently. "We'll take it along the chain of command. Paulson?"

The Tub's lips stretched taut. "Go to hell!"

Dorfman smiled. "That's more like it. But such vulgarity coming from such an attractive young lady! Gottweld?"

The nucleonist took over, seemingly grateful for the attention. The girl's form slumped languidly. Her eyes went indifferently out of focus and her mouth hung open awkwardly.

"Rub-a-dub-dub," she muttered in a thin, halting voice.

"Excellent!" Dorfman exuberated. "I see we're not far from complete repression of the Gottweld impress . . . Now for the navigator."

Craig took over spitefully.

"I'm with you, doctor. Do your damndest."

Dorfman rose and folded his arms pompously. "A bold challenge. But one which I'll be quick to accept. It isn't often one man gets the chance to dissolve three personalities."

"Then climb aboard and have at it," Craig defied. "But let's call it what it is—legalized murder."

Abruptly he felt an inner burst of rage and recognized the particular brand of turbulence as Paulson's. But before the pilot could assume vocal control the girl took over.

"You don't have to be so brutal about it," she told the psychiatrist.

Dorfman's face twisted indecisively. "There are many things you don't understand, my dear. You'll have to trust me."

Then his eyes bored in severely. "You'll have to admit, Miss Walters, that we've almost completely removed the Gottweld impress. That's what you want, isn't it?"

She tried to turn her face. But Craig, interested, kept her eyes focused on the psychiatrist.

"All right, Paulson and Craig. You may withdraw." Dorfman slumped in the chair, crossed his legs and toyed with a pencil. "Gottweld?"

"Rub-a—"

"Stop that idiotic blithering and listen. What's your full name?"

The girl's lips quivered indeterminately, then formed hesitatingly around "Gottweld."

"Is it John Harrison Gottweld?"

No answer.

"Remember anything about a ship? A tiny passenger compartment—room for only one person—a small child?"

Still no answer.

The prodding questions made Craig restless and he wanted to seize control and storm out of the office.

##Craig?##

Yes?

##We've got to do something!##

Like what?

". . . One small child, Gottweld. A child whose brain was sufficiently undeveloped to house impresses of three personalities."

"Three men in a tub." The girl's body stirred with eager interest.

##We could try escaping.##

The Tub' Craig reminded dourly, **is stronger than the impresses.**

##Not if we catch her off guard.##

DORFMAN straightened. "Three impresses on a child's mind. Three qualified,

trained personalities. Three crewmen in one physical form to take the first starship to Centauri. It had to be that way. One hundred pounds of specialized crew in the form of a twelve-year-old girl would gain only an additional twenty pounds over eight years. A hundred and twenty pounds was all the ship could accommodate."

"Impresses? Centauri?" Gottweld murmured. "Who's Gottweld?"

##See? ##Paulson offered desperately. ##Gottweld's practically gone already. Only two men in a tub now. They won't stop until The Tub's clear!##

*Where can we go?** Craig asked hopelessly.

Where could we hide? Even if we *can* take over, she'll only foul up control and eventually get back here. Anyway, we can't go on like this. It was all right for a specific purpose —as long as there was a job to do.

##You're not giving up?##

Of course not. But the only way is to convince them we're real persons; that we can't be turned out like an unneeded light.

He could sense Paulson's contemptuous resentment.

##That old integrated personality stuff again. All right. Go ahead. Try and convince Dorfman we can be welded into one. I got other ideas!##

"You will forget, Gottweld," Dorfman was demanding. "You *want* to forget everything—who you are, where you've been, how you came about."

Craig was well acquainted with the theory: If you removed all memory, if you voided the psychic impression of every past experience, there couldn't be any surviving ego. It was simply a matter of discharging the molecular configuration of all the retentive cells.

"I *must* forget," the nucleonist agreed servilely in Vivien's slight voice.

Then Craig felt a jar of exploding violence as Paulson crashed through Gottweld's insecure control.

Vivien lunged from the chair and hurled herself on Dorfman, her thin fingers clamping vehemently around his neck.

But the attack died in the catalepsy of multiple purpose as the girl and Craig frantically tried to wrest control from the pilot.

Like a jammed machine, The Tub fell back into her chair and sat there trembling, arms hanging limp over the sides.

Dorfman raised exploring fingertips to the scratches her nails had left on his neck. "That was Paulson, wasn't it?"

Regaining composure, the psychiatrist straightened his tie. "We'll get around to you next," be promised vindictively.

IT turned out to be a long and arduous session and when it was over Paulson, who had taken the brunt of the psychiatrist's whiplash onslaught, dropped exhausted to a noncommunicative level of his subconscious.

Craig, too, had doggedly fought the flashing lights and whirling discs and hypnotic monotone that scythed vital trunk lines of memory like stalks of wheat.

He still lay awake, though, as did The Tub, when the nurse came around to turn out the light in their room.

Seconds passed before his eyes (her eyes, he amended enviously) became accustomed to the moonlight flooding into the room and bringing with it the redolence of the night jasmine blooming outside the window.

A dozen times since the session had he tried to contact Vivien, even calling out in her own voice. But there had been no answer because silence, he realized bitterly, was part of the "treatment." Completely ignoring them, she had been told, would encourage voluntary detachment and hurry along the processes of total repression and erasure.

Finally he sensed the lethargy of sleep spreading evenly over her conscious. When her eyes closed he decided to leave them that way until she was deep in slumber. Then he could open them without disturbing her.

He lay reflecting on his brief session with Dorfman and the hypnotherapeutical gadgets. And he felt certain that somewhere in that fateful office he had left behind a vital part of his psychic background and past experiences that would never again be available for recall.

Vivien's eyes opened and Craig tensed. But it wasn't the girl awakening. For he could still sense the indifferent calm of her slumber.

##Craig. You with me? ## The pilot's searching thought was soft but sharp.

You mean about escaping?

#What else? Another week or two and we won't even remember what the word means.#

SOMEHOW Craig could regard the fatal future with an inordinate degree of objectivity, as though he weren't even concerned. After all, it would be the end of—nothing—a shadow of a personality—a collection of experiences—a group of concepts arranged into a pseudo being.

**What will we do?" **

##Lose ourselves in some isolated place—a cave, forest, swamp. Anywhere.##

Then what?

##We'll have to improvise as we go along. We might threaten to tighten up—stay there and starve if she doesn't see things our way.##

But where will it all lead?

##Good God, man* Your guess is as good as mine. Isn't it enough that every hour we stay away from here means an extra hour of existence?##

Craig fought a paralyzing sense of futility. It was a numbing frustration that he should have foreseen eight years ago when he and Paulson and Gottweld had trained for the Centauri expedition.

But they had failed to consider the remote future. Instead, they had unsuspectingly submitted to impress treatment, allowing images of their personalities, experiences, knowledge and technical talents to be transferred to idle groups of memory cells and assigned unused synapses in The Tub's brain.

Only, no one had looked eight years into the future. No one had envisioned the time when the expedition would be over and The Tub, who would then be a mature woman, would have to be relieved of the impresses so she could take her place in society.

And no one, not even the three pseudo crew members, had even guessed that the impresses might learn to regard themselves subjectively as real beings.

Craig gave overt expression through the girl's lips to a sigh of resignation.

I'm with you, Paulson. Let's go.

IMPARTING feather-smooth motion to the girl's body, Craig folded back the sheet and rose. It wasn't likely The Tub would awaken. She was used to somnambulistic motion while her faculties were controlled by some other member of the quadrentity.

Unconsciously, he started for the locker where her clothes hung. But his motions slowed stickily, as though the very air were solidifying to offer resistance. Immediately, though, he recognized the partial immobility of conflicting purpose.

##No time for dressing, Craig. We'll have to make the best of what we've got.##

Craig withdrew partially. **Very well. It's your show. I'll just tag along.**

Paulson slipped on a robe and stepped softly over to the window. There was a packing crate immediately outside and a smaller one next to it, simplifying their descent.

That's odd.

##What? These boxes?##

They reached the surface and started across the moist lawn.

Not only the boxes. The yardlights are turned out too.

##So what? So we're lucky.##

They saw no one else on the grounds of the institution as they crossed the lawn and reached the main entrance.

Paulson, the gate's conveniently open. And nobody's in the guardhouse.

The Tub's body halted and stiffened—an overt expression of Paulson's sudden suspicion.

##You suppose they're *letting* us escape?##

Damned if it doesn't look like it. But I can't imagine why.

##Maybe we're just having an improbable run of luck. Let's hope so.##

No time to stop and talk about it now.

They went swiftly through the gate and left the road, heading across rolling countryside toward the distant woods. More confident now, Paulson increased the sleeping girl's pace.

But as they passed under a tree, her foot rammed into an exposed oak root. The pilot swore and Craig reflexively executed the corrective balancing motions.

And still The Tub slept, even despite the sharp pain Craig could feel seeping through the thin curtain separating their egos.

##If we can get to the woods,## Paulson offered hopefully, ##it won't matter if she does wake up.##

That's right. Without our consent, she couldn't return to the institution.

##Or go anywhere, for that matter.##

She'd have to cooperate with us.

##Or die in the woods. ##

In the distance, a steady stream of cars hummed a monotonous drone along the highway, their headlights flaring suddenly and flashing into the girl's eyes as they swept around a curve.

At first Craig feared it would provide just the added disturbance to arouse her from somnambulistic slumber. But he could still sense the vacuity of her sleepful state.

##What's that?##

Craig turned his full attention to the visual stimulus and saw what had attracted Paulson's stare—an anachronistic Ferris wheel by the side of the highway.

It just doesn't make sense —out here in the middle of nowhere.

##Something's wrong, Craig, damned wrong!##

The buzzing of rubber on concrete was even more of a steady monotone than it had seemed before. It was oddly reminiscent of something, Craig thought.

And the lights of the cars, sweeping around the bend in the road, flashed with an irritating but almost enchanting regularity —with almost an hypnotic effect.

A shred of a scream came subvocally from some horrified depth of Paulson's conscious and Craig, staring through the same eyes, drew back in consternation.

There was only one occupant in each seat of the Ferris wheel. And they were all duplicates of Dorfman!

The psychiatrists leered down at them and each beckoned with a twisted finger.

And the wheel whirled and the traffic droned and the headlights flared and Craig felt himself being spun about in a nauseating vortex. And the Ferris wheel and cars and highway and countryside and Dorfmans chased one another into a monochromatic blur that left him almost senseless.

But suddenly all settled down and reshaped itself into one Dorfman bracketed by the flashing ligbts and whirling forms and other hypnotic instruments of his office. He touched a switcb and the aggravating, high-pitched monotone that had been the hum of traffic climbed down the sonic scale and faded out in a dull, bass groan.

"That'll be all for this session, gentlemen," said the psychiatrist. "See you again tomorrow?"

Craig was numb with an incredulous despair as the purpose behind the hallucinatory sequence suggested itself with mock clarity. It had been a "show" put on principally to shock and demoralize Paulson. Craig had been implicated fully, though, because it was intended to contribute to his psychical disorientation as well.

Dorfman had painted a convincing illusion of escape and had snatched it savagely away from Paulson at the last moment. A sufficient number of such experiences would send any despondent person sulking into a schizoid shell.

Those tactics had worked so successfully on Gottweld that the nucleonist's impress was already almost totally erased.

They were succeeding eminently on Paulson, contributing to his gradual withdrawal from reality.

And, with slight variation to accommodate personality differences, that method would certainly achieve the desired results witb Craig too. It was just a matter of time.

IT was difficult to believe The Tub had been a willing party to Dorfman's outrageous deceit. It was so unlike the child who had grown to maturity in the cold, gray womb of the Centauri ship and had achieved such an intense bond of pure understanding with the three men.

This relationship came back to Craig like a pleasant memory as Vivien walked aimlessly in the institution's garden the next morning.

The quadrentity, unique in the annals of psychology, had been a psychic union that had grown progressively more complete—until he had felt certain that full integration into a composite ego would be an acceptable alternative to erasure.

At one time he had almost convinced The Tub that such a consolidation would produce a plural personality superior in capabilities, talents, knowledge and character to any being on Earth. And, since she was closer to him than the other two, she had listened.

But the endless voyage had ended and The Tub had begun examining herself in comparison with normal women. And she had begun responding to Dorfman's reassurances that the impresses weren't real persons at all.

::Bruce.::

Sulking, he ignored her summoning impulse. It was the fifth time she'd tried to reach him since breakfast. But the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the attempted contact left him without any hope that her attitude would be conciliatory.

A slight breeze wafted low-lying clouds overhead. With its promise of summer soon to come, warm sunlight spread a cast of drowsiness over the garden.

Vivien paused in the shade of a tree and dropped to the lawn. She sat plucking pensively at a clump of grass.

Paulson, he tried.

No answer.

Paulson, you still with us?

Craig could detect not even a stirring from the pilot. The impact of Dorfman's hypnotic ruse must have been severe—as severe as some of the earlier disorientation tricks the psychiatrist had played on the nucleonist.

Gottweld?

::Bruce. I know you can hear me. Why don't you answer?::

Again he ignored the girl.

Gottweld.

There was a brief murmur of despair.

Gottweld! Snap out of it!

::I'm going to keep trying, Bruce, until you do answer.::

//Rub-a-dub-dub.//

The nucleonist's insipid response elicited a disturbing picture in Craig's mind—a moist lower lip vibrating under the strumming motion of a thick, rigid finger.

You've got to fight back, Gottweld! Don't let yourself go under!

//Under we go.// The returning thought was thin, uncertain. //Three men in tow. There'll be hell to pay on skid row.//

::Bruce, I need your help.::

But it wasn't The Tub who needed help, Craig realized. It was Gottweld. And desperately. He needed someone to seize him by the shoulders and shake him back to sensibility, blister his face with jarring, backhanded slaps.

BUT the nucleonist had no shoulders, no face. There could be no such thing as physical interrelationship among the members of the quadrentity—only the tenuous, unsatisfying contact of words and concepts and vague attitudes and feelings.

Yet, Craig suspected, there must be some form of communication more complete than the mere transfer of ideas. In the material world you could stand ashore and ineffectually shout directions to a drowning man. Or you could dive in and bring him out.

Unhesitatingly, Craig plunged in. He struggled frantically through misty concepts of desperate purpose and uncertain dedication, floundering for lack of orientation. But if Gottweld existed, there must be some way of penetrating the monadic haze and finding him.

Gottweld! Where are you?

The desperate call drew another responsive murmur of utter despondency.

Hold on. I'm trying to reach you!

//Rub-rub-rub-rub-rub—//

There was a sense of direction now. The monosyllabic mumble beat out at Craig until the overwhelming volume of thought was like a thunderous peal—louder, louder, louder.

Then abruptly his searching perspective probe crashed through a tenuous barrier and he was instantly caught up in an exploding maelstrom of whirling, maddening concepts—an impossible phantasmagoria of distorted mind-images and a terrifying cacophony of ideated sound.

In one corner of his field of psychic awareness was the distorted perceptual vision that came to the Gottweld impress through The Tub's eyes.

But even as he looked, the horribly twisted vista of gnarled, motile trees and crazily tilted

buildings and creeping, living hedges that harbored bideous and menacing things seemed to be drawing perceptibly away. The recession of all objects into the distance was like a slow-motion implosion, witb all the material universe dwindling into a pinpoint of infinity.

He recognized a transcendent symbolism here—a rejection of reality, a drawing into itself of tbe Gottweld impress. It was as Dorfman had planned—as Vivien had sanctioned—as it must be if individuality was to be restored to The Tub's mind.

And all around the shrinking perception of reality, Gottweld's conscious was a festering place of terrified concepts and irrational fears, peopled by nightmarish things and unimaginable horrors.

All was tortured disorder.

Gottweld was insane.

And his hope was in oblivion, in the promise that impressure erasure would give bim merciful release into the void of nonentity.

::Bruce. Please answer me!::

As though the girl's imploring thoughts were themselves a magnet, Craig was drawn up out of the whirpool of Gottweld's depraved conscious. And, with a sudden scorn, he turned hia attention toward Vivien.

Gottweld's insane. He's almost completely erased. What's left of him ia something that wouldn't be at home even in hell.

::Bruce—about Dorfman. That trick he pulled on you and Paulson—::

Don't you understand? Gottweld's destroyed! Doesn't that interest you?

She was silent a long while. And in the hyperphysical stillness, he was aware of strong emanations of uncertainty. Then there was a sudden and convincing determination.

::Gottweld,:: she offered firmly, irrefutably, ::doesn't exist. There *was* a Gottweld—a real, physical nucleonist who went by that name. But he was killed in an accident—here on Earth—four years ago.::

Gottweld—the only one you and I know—is right here with us. And you're letting Dorfman and the institution murder him!

::Don't say that—please. I've had a hard enougb time convincing myself that's not true. But I'm certain about it now. And I don't want that belief to change. I *wouldn't* like to find out, instead, that I've got to be different from other people the rest of my life.::

He detected only vague evidence of indecision—not even

strong enough for him to play upon in hope of saving himself and the otber two.

Do you actually believe I'm not real—that I'm only a vacant collection of impressions and attitudes?

There was a deep, distressed cast of affirmation in her silence.

What do you want? he asked sharply. "Why did you call?**

::You've got to believe I didn't approve of Dorfman's illusion of escape.::

You were part of it, weren't you? You went along with it.

::I didn't know. I was under hypnotic compulsion too. He told me what he was going to do; but that was after you and Paulson were under control. Then, before I could say I didn't like the idea, I was all wrapped up in the imaginary incident too.::

Craig swore vindictively. The minced phrases, coming anomalously from the girl's mouth, disrupted the stillness of the garden.

::Dorfman's not really hateful. Just remember—there's a purpose behind everything he does.::

Of course there is. Sadistic torture.

::No. You've got it wrong. He's told me things while the rest of you were subdued—things I shouldn't repeat. If only I could be sure the others weren't listening . . .::

Gottweld's totally repressed. Paulson's withdrawn, close to the brink of detachment. Even I can't reach them.

Again she paused besitatingly. And Craig waited.

OUTSIDE (to an even more complete degree now, he thought of "outside" as the vast arena of causality that excluded the intimate happenings within the quadripartite mind of The Tub) the sun drifted behind cumulus fleece and he felt a chill run through the girl's body.

::Dorfman's being brutal with Paulson because that's the only way he can get the job done. Paulson's basic temperament calls for that kind of approacb. Witb you it'll be different.::

With me, he shot back, **it would probably be a horsewhip—if Dorfman could find a way to use it.**

The Tub rose and resumed her walk between the flower beds. But she maintained the thread of inner communication.

::Bruce. Am I doing wrong?"

He laugbed sourly. **You're asking me, who *doesn't exist*, to sit in judgment over whether you're wrong in helping destroy three nonentities?**

Unresponding, she continued, ::I *want* to be normal. But when I talk with you like this it's hard to believe you're just a mechanized, suspended thought process.::

You didn't think that way for eight years.

::It was different. There was nobody except the four of us—one quadrentity. The illusion came easy then.::

But not now.

::No. They've proved what you really are.::

Then why waste time talking with me?

Her gaze swept the ground as she walked sullenly toward the fish pond.

Remember when we used to stand by the port and watch Sol grow against the background of stars and imagine we were two normal persons? You used to say—

::I can't be held responsible,:: she snapped, ::for anything I might have said as a result of juvenile infatuation.::

But was it really juvenile infatuation? You were almost twenty.

He wasn't trying to play on her sympathy. There actually had been a time when he was naive enough to believe things would work out somebow; that the end of the flight might, through some miracle, mean a new, normal relationsbip between him and The Tub.

She tensed angrily. ::All right. I thought I loved you! Have it that way. But where could it lead from there?::

We could—

::We could *nothing!* There'd be only frustration. Where would there be any normalcy? It would only be a hollow and perverted form of narcissism.::

She drew to a halt before the fish pond and they stood staring unseeingly into the deep, dark water, not even noticing the gardener who walked by and nodded a greeting.

To Craig, one thing was clear. She was right. Total erasure was the most merciful way out for all in the quadrentity.

Then he felt a spasm of erratic movement seize the girl's body and she hurled herself forward into the fish pond. Screaming, she sank below the surface.

##Let's all be erased together!## Paulson's mocking thought burst into the communal stream of conscious.

Desperately, Craig tried to swim back to the surface. But his attempted strokes only conflicted with the girl's frantic efforts to save herself. They sank into the bottom, arms and legs thrasbing in futile, uncoordinated motion.

And from somewhere in the

depths of the quadripartite mind came Paulson's sardonic laughter.

Water rushed into her lungs, burning, choking, suffocating.

Then Craig felt the pressure of a firm hand gripping her arm and once more they were above the surface.

It was the gardener who had dived into the pond in time to rescue The Tub.

DORFMAN dimmed the lights in his office and pulled a chair up in front of Vivien's. His face seemed sallow and haggard as he reached toward the battery of switches on his desk. He changed his mind, though, and folded his arms, staring intently into the girl's eyes.

"Paulson?" the psychiatrist called.

The Tub shifted uncomfortably. But her lips remained closed.

"Come on, Paulson," he coaxed. "Quit sulking. I'm enough of a psychologist to know you're watching."

The girl's lips worked frenziedly, spitting out a barrage of coarse, whispered expletives.

"About yesterday's fish pond incident," Dorfman interrupted calmly. "Don't try anything like that again."

"Stop me!" Paulson shouted in The Tub's bigh-pitched voice.

"We intend to see—"

"That it doesn't happen again?" The words found a new level of sarcasm. "What are you going to do ahout it—*punish me?*

Vivien's laugh was hitterly triumphant.

And Dorfman shrunk insecurely into his chair, his face showing the disappointment of his first defeat since he bad been assigned The Tub.

"You don't suppose I'm going to take erasure lying down?" The pilot followed up his advantage. "If I have to die I'm going to see that everybody else goes with me, from The Tub on down!"

"There'll he guards standing hy from now on," the other warned. "And I assure you that if you make trouble, the treatments from here on out can be much more severe than what has gone before."

Paulson buried himself in aloof silence.

The psychiatrist leaned forward, elbows on his knees and fists drawn up reflectively under his chin. "Well, fellows, I've arranged something of a surprise for today's session."

Craig could still feel the strong emanations of despair and fear and the deep desire for withdrawal that came from Paulson's conscious. But the navigator thrust them aside and gingerly took control of The Tub's faculties.



"We could avoid all this," he proposed, "if you'd give us a few weeks to try integration."

The psychiatrist shook his head with adamantine smugness. "It wouldn't work."

"But it would! There's no impenetrable psychic shell surrounding the egos. Whatever it is that separates one from another can be pierced. I broke through it! I reached Gottweld's subconscious!"

Dorfman dismissed the proposition with a wave of his hand. "There isn't a professional man here who can conceive how that would work. Miss Walters' interest must be protected. Society owes her a debt. It can't consent to seeing her develop further as a psychological freak."

"But what about *us?*"

"Let me prime your memory—both yours and Mr. Paulson's. Some eight years ago three men agreed to the psychic impress process, as did the guardians of a twelve-year-old girl. The trio further agreed they would have no objections to any psychotherapy that might be required to

correct results, traumatic or otherwise, that the subject might eventually suffer from the impress treatments."

"But you can't hold us to that! We thought she would simply receive a reflection of our knowledge and ability. We didn't know a sense of awareness, our actual egos, would be duplicated too!"

"Gentlemen," Dorfman said soberly, "the bare fact is that no duplicate ego was transferred—only the knowledge, only the talent, only the ability. The proposition that these collections of personality factors should consider themselves free entities is merely a case in faulty logic. Your awareness of being is simply an illusion. In short, you don't exist."

Paulson crashed through. "Damn you! Use any kind of logic you want. But you won't convince anyone but this girl!"

"Just the girl, Mr. Paulson?" The psychiatrist grinned self-indulgently. "Do you realize there are three real heroes of the Centauri expedition—Miss Walters aud the *original* Craig and Paulson. Those two men, together with Gottweld who was subsequently killed in an accident, went through years of training in order to contribute the necessary ability. Miss Walters is the one who made it possible for them to apply their talents aboard ship."

"But *we* made the trip! *We* took the risks!"

"Even now," Dorfman continued, unperturbed, "the whole system is waiting to honor Miss Walters and, to a lesser extent, Paulson and Craig. She has fired the imagination of all humanity. She has epitomized the spirit of valorous mankind on his greatest adventure. Do you want her to receive all that acclaim while her mind is cluttered with—with rebellious gimmicks?"

CRAIG could sense Paulson's utterly futile reaction, his dejected withdrawal into the shell of his subconscious. At the same time, he was aware of his own desperate and hopeless response to the coldly logical argument Dorfman was advancing.

What he said might be true, Craig conceded resentfully. But the psychiatrist didn't have to say it. Humanely, he might have avoided the subject of their complete insignificance.

But that was just the point, he realized belatedly. Dorfman was pursuing a purpose with his eloquent, coldly impersonal words. He was merely wielding a psychological weapon intended to force the two remaining impresses further out of contact with reality.

"What about re-impressions?" Craig asked, seizing at a remote possibility. "Can't you put *us*

through the impress treatment —re-transfer everything into the original Paulson and Craig?"

Dorfman tediously straightened the crease in his trousers. "We've explored that avenue. It's equally impossible. When the original impresses were effected in this girl's mind, they were only duplicates of a psychic totality that remained in the minds of the original men.

"If we were to re-impress on those original minds the experiences you've acquired over the past eight years, The Tub's mind would still be left with what's in there now. We would solve nothing. Only *reflections* of you would be passed back. You, as you now exist, would retain your present status and would *still* have to be erased."

Dorfman rose abruptly. "Now for the surprise."

He crossed to the door and swung it open. A tall, angular man with crisp blond hair entered first. Apparently in his late twenties, he paused to stare inquisitively at The Tub.

Paulson was drawn curiously out of his shell. ##What's all this abou—Good God, Craig! It's you!##

Vivien turned to watch another man enter. Slightly older than the first, he was accompanied by an attractive woman—his wife, evidently—and three children.

Paulson! Craig started.

The *real* Paulson!

Dorfman settled back in his chair, not doing a very good job of choking back a laugh.

PAULSON spoke softly to his wife and she took the children back into the corridor.

##Craig, I'm married to a woman I've never seen! And I've got *three children!*##

But Craig was too enveloped in his own emotions and in the tide of reaction that was welling in The Tub to notice the pilot's dismay.

"Bruce Craig!" Vivien exclaimed unbelievingly.

And he was even more deeply conscious of her emotional reaction as a flood of intense feeling broke through into the communal concept stream. It was a warm, poignant feeling —as though someone she had known only in a dream had become real after years of phantasmal existence.

He withdrew even more despondently, acutely aware of how impossible it would be to reach her after this.

Vivien, he called in quiet desperation.

Dorfman took the two men by the arm and brought them over to the girl.

"You three know each other," he reminded.

"Tub!" exclaimed the mate-

ria! Craig, with something more than casual interest. "It's been a long time."

"Hi, kid," Paulson greeted, adding a suggestive whistle. "What eight years didn't do!"

Inside, the impress of the navigator sensed the swirl of the girl's emotions as though they were his own. It couldn't properly be called a spontaneous affection, for there *had been* a fondness for a Bruce Craig that had developed over the years.

The psychiatrist tactfully retreated to an obscure corner of the room from where he could witness the unfolding of the interlude he had arranged.

##That damn, dirty, stinking Dorfman!##

I never figured he'd pull something like this.

##Hell, Craig, it—it's below the belt!##

It's a foul deal, all right. How can you go on believing in yourself after—this?

##I'm sick. Dorfman's right. There isn't anything for us. Nothing. We can't *ever* get back.##

Vivien!

##Tub! God, Tub, answer us! Do something!##

::Hush.::

Vivien, listen! Don't you see there *can* be two of us? Just because Dorfman produces figures of flesh and blood—

Her reaction was a wordless, almost spiteful repudiation as she stared up into the physical Craig's face.

"What's this about you having trouble?" he asked.

"It's nothing."

"The impresses?"

She nodded embarrassedly.

"Dorfman said there were aftereffects," he prodded. "Can I do anything?"

She grasped his hand appreciatively. "You've done a lot already."

Then she flushed with apology. "I'm sorry. You see, I feel like I know you pretty well. After all, I've lived witb part of your personality since I was a child."

A WIFE and three kids! A wife and three kids! A wife—##

Oh, for God's sake! Shut up, Paulson!

##Who is she? What's her name? Did I know her? Wbere —##

Distraught, Craig started to cut him off. But he felt a sudden compassion for the pilot. Anyway, that was what Dorfman wanted—to have them shut each other out as a step toward rejecting the whole of objective reality.

##Craig, you can't understand. A wife and three kids! A wife and three kids you've never seen! A—##

The pilot was beginning to babble as Gottweld had. It was a disconcerting irritation and, reflexively, Craig blocked off the stream of conscious reaction.

"Since I know so little of you," the other Craig was saying, "maybe we can even the score."

They both laughed.

"Seriously, though," he went on, "would you mind if I came to visit you, Vivien?"

"You used to call me Tub during the impress sessions."

"All right—Tub. But you still haven't answered. I'd like to hear all about the expedition—how it went, whether my impress was on its best behavior."

Momentarily, a flood of rage choked Craig. He wanted to ball the girl's inadequate fists and lash out at the self-confident thing that called itself by his name.

But what was the use? What could he possibly gain, other than Vivien's scorn?

::Thanks, Bruce. I'm glad an impress can understand.::

There was a brief session under the flashing lights and whirling forms after the two men left. But, to Craig, it was as nothing compared with the traumatic effectiveness of the visit.

By contrast, he almost hadn't minded the recall erasure treatment. And, when it was over, it made no difference that he could remember nothing about his childhood, his schooling, his family.

Or, had he had any family? At least, he must have gone to school. Everybody went to school, it seemed. Or, did they? As a matter of fact, he wondered about "school" . . . Some vague concept, no doubt, that wasn't even worth recall.

Seeking company in his despondency, he penetrated the Gottweld impress' shell.

//. . .-a-dub-dub. Tub. Rub. Hub. Free the three. Rub-a-tub-tub. Rub- . . .//

He snipped off the mournful rambling and reached out, instead, toward Paulson.

##... kids and a wife. Who was she? And her husband—he seemed familiar too. Three kids and a wife. Three men in a tub . . .##

Craig shut him out completely.

IN two more sessions of persistent ruthlessness, Paulson was submissively beaten back into the desolate mist of schizoid existence. And Craig dismally realized the pilot would remain there, eating away at his own substance, until not a trace of that impress remained.

Craig, meanwhile, sensed Dorfman had already decided upon the approach that would

send him shrinking back into his subconscious too, like a cowering animal.

The psychiatrist, he suspected, would harp upon the threat the impress posed to the security and happiness of The Tub.

Such fears proved justified during the next session when Dorfman wheeled away the table with its battery of hypnotic gadgets and came back to perch on the edge of the desk in front of the girl.

It was then that Craig noticed the full lengtb mirror against the opposite wall, positioned so that be could see The Tub's reflection. He recognized it as a substitute device for the whirling forms and flashing lights.

For a long while he sat there staring at Vivien, wistfully regarding the smooth flow of blond hair that framed her pale face and billowed against slim but adequate shoulders. And he noticed for the first time how full and warmly curved were her lips and how smoothly chiseled was the small nose and proud chin.

"She is quite attractive, wouldn't you say?" Dorfman asked, studying the girl intently.

"There weren't any reflecting surfaces aboard ship," Craig said abstractedly. "They planned it that way. It was easier without any mirrors around."

Dorfman laughed gently. "And I'm using a mirror now for the same reason they *didn't* allow one—to make it easier."

It was a gesture quite different from the derisive outbursts with which the psychiatrist had greeted Gottweld's and Paulson's desperation. It was obvious now that Dorfman was pursuing a new tack.

He came over and clasped the girl's shoulders. Craig, aware of no reaction from The Tub, realized Dorfman must have dismissed her hypnotically before summoning him to the surface.

"Craig, the time has come for a bit of frank confession. You probably think I'm a stinker of the first order for the way I disposed of Paulson and Gottweld."

Craig looked away contemptuously. "Bringing in the other Craig gets us off to a nice homey start on the third erasure too."

"Perhaps it appears that way," Dorfman admitted contritely, "but the motive was different, at least."

He lit a cigarette. "You see, I have a tough job. It's been especially difficult in that I had to modify the means in order to arrive at the same end in each case.

"The end is erasure—Wait. Don't stop me, please. I think there's some intensely logical part of your mind telling you erasure is the only solution. But the requirements vary with dif-

ferent personalities. Witb Gottweld—and to a lesser degree with Paulson—I had to be contemptible, rutbless, unrelenting.

"You ever see an animal trainer wield a whip to break a beast's spirit? Believe me, that was the only way erasure would work with the pilot and nucleonist."

Craig laughed spitefully. "But with me you're going to appeal to my better judgment."

"That's right. To an intensely logical part of your mind that has already admitted there's no other solution."

The navigator swore under bis breath. "And how can I square it with the illogical part of my mind?" he asked sarcastically.

"Look in the mirror, Craig. What do you see? A young woman. Fully mature. Beautiful. Yesterday she was a child—a child you knew more thoroughly than any man has ever known a child before. More thoroughly than you could have known even your own daughter."

"Daughter! *I'm* only twenty-eight. She's twenty."

Dorfman leaned back, but continued staring severely at the girl. "I believe you are now bringing the issue around to its proper perspective. You imagine yourself in love with her, don't you?"

Craig said nothing.

"Then you do. Very well, let me give a little psychological interpretation to your motives—something you can't figure out for yourself."

He rose and paced and stopped abruptly and said, "You only *think* you love her. Actually, it's nothing but sublimated self-pity. You feel sorry for yourself because you've got to be erased. So you arrange things mentally to make it appear that you've got a lot more to lose. With so much at stake, you'll fight harder."

It wasn't true, Craig told himself. He *knew* how he felt about Vivien. It was the way he had felt before the trip was over—before anyone had realized the impresses would have to be dealt with.

"Because of a selfish, fallacious emotion," Dorfman went on more harshly, "you would deny this girl a normal life. Because you've forced yourself to believe something that isn't true, you're going to keep her in a mental condition that would, by all practical standards, justify her being placed in an institution. That, Craig, is irrational and unreasonable selfishness."

"Go to hell."

"You're not going to reason this thing out with me?"

"Make me."

On his own, he would consider banishment into oblivion for The Tub's sake—maybe. But

he'd be damned if he'd be driven into it.

"Very well, Craig. I'd hoped for your cooperation. Without it, the job will take longer. But it won't be any less effective."

Dorfman determinedly wheeled back the table with all its gleaming devices.

CRAIG trudged through timeless corridors of vague, distorted ideas and twisted concepts. He wallowed helplessly in a mire of fear and despondency and a myriad emotions that tore at his conscious with shredding claws.

Lost, haggard, he pushed up one remote stream of thought and down another. In his frenzied wandering he tried to picture the physical equivalent of his psychic distress. It was as though he were a grimy, bearded and ragged recluse stumbling through a vast swamp with treacherous pits into which he might plunge and never emerge.

And, always, it seemed to be only the hidden corridors of fear and desperation that attracted his pointlessly ranging conscious.

But he could seldom be certain whether it was his own fear and depression or the dismal apprehension of one of the other walled-in members of the quadrentity.

Lost in the timelessness of thought duration, he pusbed through a schizoid shield and blundered into a fringe concept of dire maniacal terror.

He was at the controls of the Centauri ship as it plunged past the innermost planet of the system and streaked bow-over-stern for the blazing sun. The bulkheads were melting. But the flowing metal metamorphosed into horrifying, threatening creatures that dripped beads of liquid fire as they advanced on the crew.

Paralyzed with a fear he recognized as belonging to the imprisoned Paulson impress, he bolted the phantasmal self-torture chamber and banished himself to the infinite nothingness outside the isolated egos.

But, as though drawn by a magnet, he could sense the morbid attraction that was pulling him relentlessly into the Gottweld impress. His wandering subpercipient conscious pierced the tenuous curtain of no-concept and was instantly enveloped in an even more maddening, more frenzied miasma of total disorganization.

The desperate Gottweld subconscious caught him up in an hypnotic grip and suddenly he *was* the nucleonist—Gottweld screaming as the ship's pile notched a step nearer runaway chain reaction; Gottweld as a meteor punctured the bulkhead

of his compartment; as he went floundering out into the boundless vault of space; as a thousand life forms on an alien planet closed in, bringing their countless varieties of torturous death.

Craig may have spent a second as a captive of the nucleonist's impress. It may have been a year. There was no way of knowing. Nor was there any indication that the experience itself might not have been nurtured by Dorfman's commanding voice during one or a dozen psychotherapeutic sessions.

But finally he was free and wandering again. Now he was strolling up a corridor that led into a warm, breezy park where a score of children were happily at play. It was a nonsensical game in which the boys chased the girls until each had been captured. Only, he was one of the girls and the others called him Vivien as they urged him/her to run faster.

It was a poignantly nostalgic scene (as it came to him from the depths of the girl's subconscious), vividly etched in memory from some carefree era that predated her quadripartite life. And he lingered as long as he could—until the aubtle compulsion seized him again and drew him back to his endless quest for direct sensual perception.

ALWAYS the object was before him—some means of re-establishing contact with the outside world through The Tub's senses. But always there was the imposing bulk of Dorfman, blocking his path, standing there adamantly and with a rigidly extended arm pointing the way back to schizoid imprisonment.

Sometimes, though, he succeeded. Sometimes he found a side thought corridor which the psychiatrist had overlooked. And during these rare instances he managed to reclaim his heritage of perceptual integrity.

And his reward was an occasional sensual impression—a faraway mumble of voices which he recognized as those of institution attendants; the occasional whiff of night air that came to him from The Tub's window, jasmine-scented and cool, and, more rarely, a glimpse of the walls of her room or of Dorfman's anxious face.

But there was another avenue to the world of objective reality —one that he stumbled upon quite accidentally while exploring the pleasurable regions of The Tub's subconscious. It was only a aecond-hand means of perceptual contact with the outside world. But, in desperation, he accepted it eagerly.

It was the ever-running stream of impressions that cascaded

from The Tub's senses into the vaults of conscious recall. Whenever the compulsion to withdraw into himself abated momentarily, he seized upon the opportunity to invade the girl's mind and intercept this memory stream somewhere along its wending course.

It was a refreshing experience, with the sounds and tastes and smells and images fresher, more vivid, sharper as he neared the source of percipience. But always there was the distressing realization that the images were only delayed reflections of reality—that the farther he pushed up the bedstream of conscious time toward the sensual present, the harder it was to make additional headway.

Submerged thus in the memory stream on one occasion, he saw with The Tub's eyes and heard with her ears as the material Craig entered the solarium.

He tried to guess at the vintage of the memory, but relinquished the attempt as he felt himself being swept away before a dual reaction of self-compassion and interest in watching what would happen. (What *had* happened at some earlier time, he corrected himself, realizing he was dealing with a playback of the recall process and not contemporary events.)

The objective Craig crossed the room, held the girl loosely around the waist and planted a kiss on her forehead. And the casualness of the gesture convinced the impress that weeks must have passed since his last clearly-remembered session with Dorfman.

The two sat by the open window and The Tub stared outside at the late afternoon scene with the lawn beginning to relinquish its verdure and an occasional browning leaf bowing to the onrush of autumn. And only then did the impress become acutely aware that *months* had passed since psychotherapy had begun on the girl.

The material Craig lit a cigarette. "By Christmas?"

"Dorfman hopes so," she returned dispiritedly.

"I thought he was sure."

"He was. But erasure isn't coming along as fast as he thought it would.

"Oh."

Forgetting that he was witnessing a transpired event, Craig tried to seize control of the girl's faculties just long enough to cry out, to let them know he was still there, to tell them how lonely he was. But there was no way now that he could control even her voice.

"Vivien, why the delay? Has anything gone wrong?"

She shrugged dejectedly. "No. But it's taking a lot longer than

Dorfman expected. Bruce, you suppose that means something? Can it be that the impresses actually did achieve entity?"

"Nonsense." He placed his arm reassuringly about her shoulder. "Like Dorfman explained, they were just rather complete bundles of knowledge and memory, ability and talent. It was your own synthetical power that gave them the semblance of individuality. Dorfman isn't treating *them*, actually. He's treating *you*—trying to recondition the parts of *your* mind that were impressed with the past experiences of the three men."

She smiled appreciatively.

And the impress could sense the gesture through the subtle undercurrent of well-being that suddenly dominated the memory stream at that point.

"You make it sound simple," she said.

"Then what seems to be the trouble?"

"Gottweld's taken care of. Dorfman says all his cells have been stripped clear. And Paulson is completely inhibited. That erasure is over the hump. Even if it's left alone, it will fade out entirely. But—"

Craig laughed. "Then it's *my* impress that's acting up. I might have guessed it. I've always been pretty bullheaded."

"Oh, your impress is shut out, all right. It's been over two months since Dorfman made conscious contact. And even then the memory of that session was voided completely."

"Then what's wrong?"

"It—he, I mean it won't compact. It won't collapse in on itself. Dorfmau calls it a 'wandering persistence'."

"You mean it can still contact you?"

"Of course not. It's shut off. But—"

"Could you contact it if you wanted to?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid to try. Dorfman tells me to leave it alone."

"Why are you afraid, Vivien?"

"Maybe it's because I might break down in a sense of pity. Maybe I'm afraid I'll be convinced the impress does have distinct existence. That would ruin everything. How could the institution cure me if I'm working against it?"

She trembled and he put bis arm around her. "Careful now. Remember, Dorfman said you had to guard against just this sort of a guilt complex."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing," he said stubbornly, obviously changing the subject. "Tell me something—on Centauri II, was there a time when you were filling the water tanks and laughed at a leaf floating down the river with a sad-

eyed little animal sunbathing on it?"

"Yes, there was. But how did you know? I didn't put *that* in the report."

"At one point, did Paulson have to fight his way on manual through a meteor swarm for over twenty hours because an auto-control circuit had shorted?"

"That's right!" she was soundly surprised.

To the impress Craig, the incident seemed, somehow, oddly familiar, as though he, himself, might have once participated in it long, long ago.

THERE was a sudden blinding flash of pure light that fiercely penetrated every area of Craig's conscious. And the subdued visual continuity of The Tub's memory stream seemed dim and inadequate by comparison. The inexplicable super-illumination flared even more brilliantly, shaping itself into a startlingly beautiful impression of Vivien's face. It was like a transfigured intaglio, etched by lightning and drawn in sunken lines of frozen fire and deep, vivid patches of living shadow.

The splendid apparition that pervaded his entire being and occupied all of the vast stretches of the ethereal thought region was animate. And, although the eyes stared indifferently off into the distance, The Tub's lips seemed to be eternally poised on the brink of a tender word.

The image faded and, once more, Craig was left sullenly alone with the girl's memory stream, witnessing the incident which the physical Craig and Vivien had shared—how long ago?—in the solarium.

Slowly, the angular, intense face of the man drew closer and, at this point, the girl's stream of pluperfect conscious conveyed the subtle impression of capable arms closing around her waist and lips pressing hard against hers.

Despairing, the impress Craig drew away from the ironic interlude. Vivien was, had been his—Bruce Craig's. That much was implied, if not completely understood, during the last year of the voyage. And now she *was* Bruce Craig's. But it was a different Craig, while he, himself, had been banished to extinction.

He was torn inconsolably between alternate desires either to retreat, defeated, into the schizoid prison which was being prepared for him or to drift back down the stream of conscious and wistfully rewitness the humiliating incident.

But instead he plodded insensately upstream, bucking the orderly flow of stored interludes that comprised the girl's mem-



ory. Despondently, he stumbled awkwardly through the succession of days and nights, pressing ever forward mechanically in his quest for the present—for the direct sensual contact with the outside world that would come when he reached the fountainhead of the stream.

A sense of terrifying frenzy seized him abruptly and he charged more blindly now up through the sequence of The Tub's personal experiences.

The everyday occurrences of her pluperfect life, the indifferent comings and goings of the institution's attendants, the more than occasional visits by the objective Craig, the sessions with Dorfman, the afternoons in the solarium, the dark, sleepful, insensate nights—all blended into an inchoate phantasmagoria. And the endless successions of days, foreshortened by the impossible speed of his reckless dash through them, became but a flickering, gray blur as he swept through them.

God! How long had it been since a material Bruce Craig had taken Vivien in his arms on a serene October day in the solarium? There was only the vaguest of impulses to stop and examine a more recent stretch of the girl's conscious experiences and learn wbat he was afraid to know.

BRUCE.::

It was sbe! *The Tub* was calling *him!* After all these weeks—months? years?—of total rejection, of complete disregard of his existence, she was summoning.

::Bruce.::

Fiercely, he clung to the communicative thought impulse. It was a warm, solicitous voice come to dispel the loneliness of an abysmal, endless night.

::Please, Bruce. I've got to know if you're still there.::

He savored the poignant sensation of being wanted, of being recognized, afraid that should he answer he would satisfy the purpose of the voice and it would go away, never to seek him out again.

::They say you're almost totally inhibited, Bruce. They say therapy is nearly over. But I've got to know if we're doing the right thing.::

Therapy? He tried to imagine what kind of therapy she might mean. Then he puzzled over why she was calling him and, more pertinently, why he should be so exuberant merely to receive her thoughts.

::Don't you see? I've got to know! If you're real—if you're actually something more than a bundle of personal experiences—I couldn't let them destroy you. That's why I'm try-

ing to reach you before it's too late.::

Now he remembered—the Centauri expedition, the institution, the impresses, The Tub, three men. It all returned gradually, indistinctly.

::Bruce. Don't let me do anything wrong. If you're still there, tell me. And I'll know that if they couldn't do away with you after all this time, they'll never be able to. I'll quit therapy. I'll help bring you back.::

After all this time—he repeated the phrase awesomely. But after *how* long? How much time *had* passed? And, if the real Craig had held her in his arms three weeks ago, two months ago, a year ago, what was the relationship between them now?

Was it that Vivien, in trying to contact him, was only seeking assurance that she was doing nothing wrong in submitting to the psychotherapy sessions? What if he answered her call? Would she then abandon the sessions? And would it mean the end of everything between her and the other Craig?

::Bruce. Ob, Bruce! Can't you answer?::

And if he didn't respond, would she interpret that as signifying that notbing stood between her and his physical counterpart?

::Bruce?::

Furtively, he cowered behind the dismal, oppressive curtain of his own schizoid shell, eagerly seeking the resolution that would prevent him from ever straying out again.

Sometime later—an eternity later?—he started before a suddenly materialized scene that might have come to him directly from tbe objective world. It was as though he had again briefly been granted physical contact with reality through the girl's vision.

But somehow the perceptual scene that came to him didn't seem like something that would be witnessed in Vivien's realm of ordinary experience. Before him were arrayed the dull, gray bulkheads of an interplanetary passenger vessel's crew compartment, with its control instruments and screens and plotting boards.

The image enjoyed only ephemeral existence before it faded under a suffusion of nothingness. But so convincingly had it seemed a sensual impression that long dormant yearnings for physical existence weakened the schizoid wall and, more casual than otherwise, he struck out anew in search of objective perception.

"CRAIG! Bruce Craig!"

It was a dull, booming omin-

presence that penetrated every fiber of the ethereal thought region and suddenly stayed Craig in his quest.

"Come out, Craig. I'm waiting."

All around, the black nothingness eddied in wild patterns of fear and defiance and spawned a myriad points of blinding, scintillating light. It was as though he were adrift in boundless space with an unrestricted vision that took in every coruscating star.

"Craig!"

The word thundered and the stars whirled in a macabre dance of tremulous terror, shifting, moving afferently into indeterminate blobs of light, dispersing, converging again.

Suddenly the radiant splashes were a thousand vaguely familiar faces—all demanding, all scowling fiercely, all identical.

"I order you to the surface, Craig!" All the lips moved in unison and legions of fingers, crooked and beckoning, materialized beside the faces.

Confounded, Craig fled desperately into the once familiar regions of The Tub's subconscious, seeking obscurity in the depths of a forgotten incident.

It was a warm, rainy day (in that stored recollection) and Vivien, scarcely five years old, was in the kitchen constructing islands of overturned bowls and pans on the sea that was the polished tile floor. The toaster was a ship and the girl's small hand was the zephyr that sent it sailing swiftly to its next port of call—the stained baking pan.

The cabinet was open, as it had been on his last exploratory visit to this memory excerpt. Only, now its once forbidding murkiness loomed as an inviting sanctuary.

But three of the leering faces were in there too!

Coordinately, they smiled in derision. *"Don't be afraid, Craig. I won't hurt you. You* must *come out!"*

Suddenly he recognized the features. They were Dorfman's!

And, as he shrank fearfully, all the horrors of the institution and the sessions and the psychiatrist's relentless determination to destroy him were reborn with the force of an explosion in his memory.

He retreated frantically, the kitchen scene fading into nothingness as he plunged desperately down The Tub's fragmented juvenile recall stream toward the dead end of prenatal impressions.

Then he was lost in an incongruous region of repressed infant chimeras and fantasies, with nursery furniture that turned into friendly and threatening animals and adult voices that roared like ominous cavern

winds and huge hands that caught and pressed like the relentless faces of a vise.

But he turned down the suddenly enticing corridor of a remembered nursery rhyme and hid himself among the soothing tones and rhythms of a maternal voice that fell upon him like a comforting spray of soft talcum powder and scented toilet water.

Surely Dorfman wouldn't find him here. Surely the psychiatrist had never probed this deep into the obscure area of repressed urges and forgotten desires that was The Tub's psychic foundation.

But Dorfman *was* there!

Masterfully, vindictively, his great gnarled hands ripped through the thin veil of infantile serenity and stormed menacingly into the suppressed memory sequence.

Confounded, Craig plunged more frenziedly up the stream of childhood conscious, branching off into a dismal tunnel of long-forgotten and primitive frustrations and fears.

Vivien was there—eight years old and in pigtails and with her eyes wide in terror as she clung precariously to the ledge outside her window in the beginning of a traumatic experience.

Only, it was Craig who clung to the ledge in the child's pajamas and stared down in somnambulistic terror into the yard below where monstrous forms and amorphous, slimy things waited lustfully.

But abruptly each hideous creature was a replica of the psychiatrist. And all greedily extended their arms toward the child on the ledge.

In that moment of frozen terror, Craig heard the voices, sibilating harshly through the entire warp of intrapsychic space:

Mushily vibrant: *How much longer?*

Direct and massive: *Quiet! You'll ruin everything!*

Is she all right?

If you can't keep your mouth shut, then get out!

HIS/HER fingers lost their final grip on the ledge and, suddenly incorporeal once more, Craig plunged toward the myriad waiting Dorfman arms.

But the inertia of the psychical drop took him past the doctor and completely out of the suppressed incident and into tbe ebony infinity of the no-concept void.

But he couldn't stay there! There was no place to hide! And he mustn't return to The Tub's ego. For the psychiatrist had unrestricted access to every niche and facet of the girl's subconscious.

A giant, cold, steady hand emerged from the insuperable blackness, reaching out for him.

"Come, Craig. Follow me to the surface—to reality."

But he lunged away, seeking out the subtle attraction of the Paulson impress' remnants so he would at least have a definite direction of flight.

Impetuously, he charged through the still coalescing shell of schizoid detachment. And the utter chaotic madness hit him like a blast of furnace air—stifling, damning, disorganizing even the tottering vestiges of his own rationality.

All was filth and horror and unimaginable gloom and despair. All was shrieking vituperation and agonized, mournful withdrawal. The recognizable characteristics of the pilot's personality were all gone. Left were only the basic libidinal drives—the destitute id—a cauldron of seething excitement and primitive feelings, of blind and raw impulses—a festering mire of hopelessness and utter despair.

And the bestial horrors and nauseous smells, the acrid tastes and torturous impressions of pain and thwarted desire were submerged under a basic, overriding concept of pitiable bewilderment over lost identity.

Dismayed, Craig withdrew. And all the while he desperately resisted the hypnotic attraction as the shattered personality of the pilot seemed to reach out with clutching hands to sweep him up and make him an eternal part of the doomed Paulson malignancy.

Dazed from the impact of insane horrors, he broke feebly through the confining wall and drifted aimlessly, letting the psychic paralysis of the encounter play itself out.

Too late!

Before he realized what was happening, he sensed his involuntary passage through the now gossamer shell of tbe Gottweld impress.

Impulsively, he tried to escape before he could be drawn inexorably into the expected maelstrom of violent lunacy.

But there was nothing here! Only the tenuous curtain and, within, the vague haze of a final, dwindling remnant of pure identity.

Like the echo of a lost soul, only the basic autoconcept resounded thinly within the Gottweld region.

"I, I, I, I, I, I . . ."

And, even as he stood appalled at witnessing the final destruction of an ego, the last dying whisper faded out and the definitive curtain collapsed, like a veil of mist being wafted away on a suddenly stirring breeze.

Like lacy spray playing above the crest of a wind-driven wave, the mist eddied into nothing and in its place materialized the image of the psychiatrist.

"Come, Craig. Let's quit playing cat and mouse. I'm taking you back to reality."

And abruptly there was a taste. The strong, biting acridity of tobacco on Craig's lips, the soothing swirl of warm, heavy smoke in throat and lungs. Bodiless though he was, he reveled in the imagined, almost forgotten sensation of smoking.

"Coming, Craig?"

ALL psychic space gave mushrooming birth to a tremendous display of fierce luminosity that blotted out even the compelling image of the psychiatrist. Tbe formless blaze of light vacillated tremulously and reshaped itself into an objective scene.

Now he seemed to be inside Dorfman's office watching the psychiatrist who stood tensely before The Tub as she slumped in her chair. He was whispering urgent words and her closed eyelids flinched with each movement of his lips. But no sound came to Craig with the inexplicable vision from nowhere.

The scene faded and Dorfman's commanding figure loomed once more against a background of ebon velvet. *"Back, Craig. Back to objectivity."*

Then suddenly he realized be was *hearing* the words! No vague thought impulses these. They were distinct auditory sensations.

"You may emerge," Dorfman coaxed magnanimously. *"The way is open."*

There was another burst of light and sound and abruptly Craig was fighting a dazzling luminescence that bathed every corner of his conscious. The unbearable brilliance took solid form, shaping itself into the familiar features of the psychiatrist's office.

"That's better," said Dorfman, seated on the edge of his desk. "Glad to have you with us again."

Craig responded gradually to the kinesthesia of The Tub's body. And with the objective wholeness of physical awareness, with the sensations of heartbeat and pulse and breathing and warmth and skin pressures, came a more complete recollection of many of the things he had forgotten.

But, remembering his identity as an impress and the persistent effort that had already gone into erasure was like reopening a fresh wound. The warm blood of bitter, despairing memory flowed copiously.

"All right, Craig," Dorfman spread bis hands tentatively. "We've had ourselves an amusing little game for several months. But it's going to stop now."

With the heavy curtain drawn open along the opposite wall,

light flooded in through the window. Outside was the shimmering whiteness of a snow-covered countryside bathed in the thin rays of a winter's sun.

Once it had been spring and a young woman had been spirited out of a conquering ship and brought to a sequestered institution, there to be "cured." But that had been an eternity ago. And now the crushing force of that eternity was like an unbearable weight that made Craig feel old and utterly helpless.

He shifted the girl's vision along the wall away from the window and discovered the material Craig indifferently smoking a cigarette, his foot propped on a chair.

"I let it go this far," the psychiatrist offered disappointedly, "because I thought that in due time things would work out. But they haven't."

"I don't want to be erased," Craig said feebly, the words seeming even more ineffective and slavish in the girl's slight voice.

"You've no choice. You've been called back for a final session that will crush your bullheaded resistance—that will make you experience every form of imagined physical torture should you try to 'wander' again."

"No!" Craig tried desperately. "No—please!"

Dorfman paced. "Evidently, despite our thoroughness, you've found some way of warding off schizoid compression. But we're going to correct that condition."

Hopelessly, Craig tried to draw away, find temporary escape in the obscurity of his own psychic region. But Dorfman's magnetic stare held him helpless.

He wondered then how Vivien was reacting to his presence. But even with the most intense concentration he could make no conceptual contact with the girl. The psychiatrist had tactfully disposed of her conscious before beginning the session.

DORFMAN approached and loomed over The Tub, fists pressed stiffly against his hips and legs spread superciliously.

"Over the past several months," he disclosed callously, "we've had a number of sessions that you know nothing about because we shunted out your conscious. We did that in order not to interfere with the withdrawal process."

The psychiatrist strode over to the closet and pulled open the door. "This one, though, you'll remember—for as long as you have a memory, I assure you."

He trundled out the table and the suspended forms danced at the ends of their strings like the abstract elements of an intriguing mobile.

Impulsively, Craig lunged. But there were straps holding the girl's arms. Then his will to resist ebbed. He shrank futilely into the chair and a calming, almost pleasant lethargy flowed over him.

For a moment he dwelt fondly on the radiantly luxurious feeling that was like a warm glow suffusing his entire being—the kinesthetic sensations of muscular movement, the reassuring rush of sensual impressions of sight and sound and smell, the magnificent realization that there were limbs which he could control with the mere volition of a casual thought.

But his euphoria fell away like a paltry veil, delivering him to an apathetic indifference. The design of fate, after all, stretched out before him now in incredible simplicity. Dorfman would put him through his paces of hypnoconditioning; he would return utterly and completely into himself, like a snake swallowing its tail. And, in a short while, there would be . . . nothing.

The psychiatrist wheeled the table toward the center of the room and Craig started, suddenly attentive.

Why was he seeing *two* images of Dorfman—two images of the room, one superimposed upon the other?

Fascinated, he watched the man and table progress across his field of vision in a normal manner, from right to left. But, as though in a double-exposure effect, a duplicate image of Dorfman confused the stronger visual impression by moving left to right in the same field. And each image had its individual background, one being the wall in front of The Tub and the other the wall behind her.

Then he sensed treachery and closed the girl's eyes against his tormentor's deceit. The psychiatrist had employed precession tricks before—illusions to strip away his defense and take him off guard so there'd be less resistance to the hypnotic process.

Abruptly Dorfman's hand stung him across the girl's cheek. Her eyes blinked open instinctively and he was immediately captivated by the beguiling dancing forms and delightfully interesting light patterns.

NOTHING.

Impenetrable blackness and vacuous silence—the impossible stillness and senselessness of profound psychic space.

Only the faint, false-real afterglow of past experience. And even that mocking pseudo illumination was sustained only by a shred of faith, a failing belief that such abstract things as material objects and physical life and real light had once existed.

But he wouldn't go mad as Gottweld and Paulson had. Of that he felt an unbounded certainty.

Momentarily, he considered trying to break out of his psychic prison. But even the suggestion brought hellishly real impressions of physical torture—slivers of burning bamboo under fingernails that didn't exist, bones breaking and muscles tearing on the rack, the lash of rawhide against an imaginary back, the agony of unreal skin being stripped away from nonexistent flesh with electrically charged forceps.

Forlornly, he dismissed the possibility of escape and, for the first time in eons, let all the tension flow out of him. It was like falling into a placid half-sleep after an eternity of trudging exhausted through a foul swamp.

He relaxed in the luxurious comfort of total apathy.

And suddenly there was sound—real, objective sound with the unmistakable fullness and consistency of outer-world origin.

It was the torrential swish of water spraying down in a thousand droplets and splattering against tile and flesh.

Craig drew back from the auditory impression, instinctively aloof, remembering the spurious effects that had come to him occasionally—the voices from nowhere, the images of faces, vague and distorted, the tastes and smells and sensations of touch, incongruous and inexplicable.

But they had meant nothing. They had probably been no more than merciless ruses intended to strip away elements of his personality in the erasure process.

Curiously though, he relaxed again, wondering whether there might conceivably be some degree of valid significance to the manifestations. Would they have come more frequently except for the resistance of constant tension over the past months?

And, as though affirming his suspicion, there were other sensations—the pelting of tepid drops against naked flesh, the ticklish feel of rivulets coursing down cheeks and forming cataracts off tips of nose and chin.

The impression of warmth vanished and was replaced by an instant, wet frigidity that was like a thousand icy needles pricking his skin. It brought a breathless gasp from his throat.

And he retreated impulsively, like a furry animal darting back down its hole after being surprised by a child with a prodding stick.

But the sensations had been *that* real! He had almost felt the

goose flesh and heard the reflexive sound as he imagined himself catching his breath!

IN profound thought, he entertained a vast, unbelievable, dawning suggestion, too incredible to be true.

Yet . . .

He tried probing the schizoid shell.

Instantly the imagined tortures came.

He drew back relaxedly . . . and welcomed another sensual impression.

(There was a difference, evidently, between reaching out to intercept physical sensations, which brought immediate reprisal, and passively receiving those that came to him gratuitously.)

This time there was objective vision—the walls and effects of a bathroom, the blur of a cloth swishing about in his field of sight, the bulkiness of moist hands that drew up occasionally with the towel and brought darkness over the scene.

Then Craig tensed in disbelief. With the too-real vision came a mental reflection—an experience dredged from the past—*one of his own experiences!*

It was a recollection of the landing at Terraport following the Centauri trip—the bands playing, dignitaries, scientists, medical experts waiting to whisk The Tub away from the crowd.

The recollection had been complete and vivid. Only, *he* hadn't recalled it—not entirely on his own, anyway. There was a subtle but undeniable conviction that the thought had been some one's else's.

Yet there was no one else in the quadrentity who had that memory! Gottweld and Paulson had been withdrawn at the time of the incident, exhausted from the mental exertion of the approach and landing. And Vivien had been in a somnambulistic state, subdued by physical fatigue.

Only he, the impress Bruce Craig, the navigator of the expedition, had been conscious to direct the quadripartite Tub and experience the sequence.

And it was a memory that he recognized now, with its sudden return, as one of the first to be stripped away by Dorfman. But where had it been? And how had he recaptured it? Was the erasure process failing?

And the other memories that had been pirated away—he could sense the presence of them all now, lying in some convenient psychic vault and ready for instant recall.

The incoming physical sensations strengthened and ex-

panded and now, beside the visual stimulus of the swishing towel and the auditory effect of water splashing in a face basin, he reacted to the impact of a burst of kiuesthetic awareness on his conscious. And he could feel the strong, capable body of which he was newly possessed.

A mirror loomed suddenly in his line of sight and he stared incredulously at the features of the material Bruce Craig.

Confounded, the impress drew back into itself, secure in the knowledge that it could recapture the physical sensations at will.

Some of it was beginning to appear rational now. Hadn't he once heard Craig tell Vivien that he was somehow receiving memory impressions of the flight?

Wasn't it possible that *all* of the recollections which he, as an impress, had lost had been transferred through some empathic effect to retentive cells in the other Craig's mind?

And, with such a transference, wouldn't it be logical to assume that the complete experiences of the Craig impress, the sum total of the ego as modified over the past eight years, was subtly being reincorporated into the personality of the physical Craig? Was disintegration in the impress synonymous with reintegration in the original?

Such a transfusion, he conceded, would seem plausible on tbe basis of the overwhelming psychic affinity and the occasional physical proximity of the impress and its material counterpart over the past months.

The concept was vast and incredible. Yet, nothing else could explain all the anomalous sensations he had experienced in his inhibited state but had been too dazed to question:

The physical sounds of detached conversations that had pervaded the isolated tbought region from time to time.

The occasional valid sensations of feel and smell.

The authentic visual impressions—the flash of faces, the double-negative effect of watching from two different perspectives as Dorfman wheeled the table into his office.

The material Craig had been in the office then; had witnessed the same scene. And, in emphatic counterrelationship, his perception had been transferred to the impress' conscious.

But the other hadn't been aware of the emphatic effect because there had thus far been only a transfusion of recollections while the displaced conscious of the impress bad remained separate.

Now, however—now that the

impress had ascertained what was happening—there could be a total reintegration of the split Craig personality.

The two parts—the original, with its individual experiences of the past eight years, and the impress, with its separate and distinct cognitive existence during the same period—could blend once more into the reconstructed whole.

Experimentally, he tested the hypothesis by summoning a recent memory from the distinctive objective-Craig segment of the dual personality.

> And he thought of the previous evening—a drive through the moon-washed country—Vivien close beside him as the wind swept her hair back, her face uptilted to drink in the freshness of the night.

It was a wonderfully gratifying recollection and it was his as much as it was the material Craig's.

THEY/HE stood before the mirror and adjusted the knot on his/their tie.

The experience was real. The sensations of manual direction, of participation in the action were strong.

And, as yet, he (the other Craig) hadn't begun to suspect the process of reintegration. Perhaps he never would. Perhaps it would come off so smoothly that there would be only a subconscious awareness of temporary duality until unification was complete.

> He tried to withdraw. But he achieved only an approximate degree of detachment, of walled-in isolation. Sensing a growing resistance to such unnatural disassociation, he felt himself being forced back involuntarily to objective status as part of the duopersonality.

They/he finished dressing and went down to the reception room of the institution's guest building.

Vivien was there. She smiled at him/them and came over.

"Hi, Tuh," he said. "It's been a long time."

She lifted an eyebrow dubiously. "Yes," she said facetiously. "All of twelve hours."

He took her arm. "Now why do you suppose I said something like that?"

THE END



The Violin String

By HENRY HASSE

Illustrator SUMMERS



Versatile Henry Hasse tries his hand—and mast successfully—at modernizing a Lavecraft theme and a Lovecraft style to fashion an eeric tale of a man who was—or was not—mad.

THE MAN came silently, swiftly, approaching me out of the clustered shadows in the large gloomy hall. I gave a start and rose from the chair. There was that indefinable feeling that I had been under scrutiny for some moments.

"You are the man from the magazine—" He said it not as a question. He stood poised, long arms hanging loose, the dark im-

mobile face relieved only by an alertness about the eyes.

I nodded, reached for my credentials, but he stopped me with a gesture. "I know," he said. "You want to do the violin story. I showed Dr. Sherman your letter. He will be happy to receive you." A pause, and I felt the alert eyes upon me. "You are aware that others have tried?"

"I know that," I said brusquely. "And I know they were ill-equipped! Two years ago I covered the International Congress of Psychiatrists in London, and I heard Dr. Sherman give one of the outstanding addresses. I'm not after Sunday supplement stuff!"

"Ah-h-h," he said, and that was all. No censure of my bombastics, though his eyes showed it—or was that amusement?

He gestured, and I followed. Through a shadowy draped doorway, along another panelled hall redolent with brownish decay. It reminded me somehow of the stories of Lovecraft—but I cut those thoughts off abruptly.

"Here you are, sir." We had reached a room somewhere at the rear of the huge sprawling house. I was ushered in, I was announced, and the door closed softly behind me.

And Dr. Frederic Sherman—until lately one of the most renowned and respected figures in his field, whose brilliant career I had followed as a layman—this man rose to greet me with a hearty handshake. He professed to remember me! He even remarked on my excellent coverage of the International Congress!

I knew it was an improvised lie. I had put all of that in my letter. But I remembered *him* well, and now I wondered why I had expected to find him changed? For he hadn't changed at all—he was still tall and gaunt and vigorous, with heavy graying brows that seemed formidable, until you glimpsed the blue eyes peering and heard his jovial voice.

"So it's the story you want!" he boomed cheerfully. "I know. You think I don't remember you. But it's evident you must have heard, because you follow these things. You must be aware that I'm in disrepute now, eh?"

"Well," I hesitated—"let's just say there are differing *versions* about this—this string from the violin . . ."

"Versions." His eyes clouded, then brightened as he looked at me. "Very well. When I have finished you'll believe. I'm going to relate the event exactly as it happened; more, I'll show you proof. The indisputable evidence!"

"Evidence?" I felt a sudden pulsing at my throat.

"Oh yes. I still have it, you

know . . . the metal string, that damnable string! The string from the violin."

I didn't interrupt again, I dared not, as I accepted the chair he offered and settled down to listen.

IN MY profession (he began), I have had occasion to observe varying degrees of psychosis. Both those who were madmen in their genius, and quite conversely, geniuses who were madmen. Oh yes, there is a distinction! But as the years went by these cases lost their unusual aspects for me, and I remembered them only impersonally.

All save one. I refer, of course, to the case of Philip Maxton and the violin string. I assure you, there is no violation of professional ethics on my part in discussing it now.

I was residing then on Crescent Heights—you know the place?—and it was there that Maxton first came to me. It was March, and the sea was pounding. I recall that storm warnings had been out for most of the day. I had just settled down in my study, when there came a frantic ringing of the doorbell, and a minute later my servant ushered in the young man.

I tell you, sir, he was wild in appearance. Terror was upon him. He was about thirty, and I judged him to be a student, one whose quest might lie in the field of the true metaphysics. No, let me correct that! It's only that his name, when he introduced himself, was somewhat familiar to me. He was outstanding in that rather vague field of pseudo-science dealing with vibration and structural dimensions; he had also published some slight tracts on the latent powers of the mind, which I had read—for although some tended to be wild, others were of deep thought and possessed merit.

Philip Maxton. You know the name? Perhaps you even recall the stir that was roused by his disappearance.

He introduced himself in a rush of words. The first hints of the storm were on him, his clothes mud-spattered and damp. He shivered, but I could see it was *not* from the chill night.

"Come with me," I urged. "There's a fireplace in the next room where you can warm yourself—"

"A fireplace!" I'll never forget the way he uttered the word. There was *desire* in it, there was *despair* in it, and he looked at me through wild eyes. But in the next instant he became profuse in his thanks for what he called my kindness!

He refused to sit down. He stood away from the fire, stared at it with fascination. I studied him well as I filled my pipe. His

outward expression baffled me. His attitude for the fire was almost one of primitive curiosity rather than gratitude for its warmth . . . and I noticed something else. He kept his head half turned away, cocked as though hearking to something I was not meant to hear.

Outside, the storm broke with fury. I could hear it shrieking around the windows, lashing through the night as a smother of rain swept in from the bay.

"Fire," I murmured. "It fascinates you, does it not? So warm and soothing, and on a night like this—"

At my words, he began to shiver violently. I had gaged him well. He possessed an antipathy, even a fear of fire, albeit fire drew him irresistably—a condition not too unusual even in normal people.

"Fire and storm," he uttered hollowly. "They possess me! They bring me to—*this*, and to things much worse!" He sought to control his trembling. "And yet I must seek fire and storm!"

"I'm sure you do," I said offhandedly, "and I'd like to hear about it. But we have the entire evening." So I dismissed it, and brought a measure of normalcy. "Tell me about *you*," I insisted.

It was what he waited for. He began to talk, fast and without pause, launching into an explanation of himself. His background was of sound New England stock. There had never been a serious illness. His schooling was normal and ordinary, through grade and high-school, but curtailed in the second year at Brown University. Throughout, there had been the usual vagaries of science-fiction, ranging from Burroughs into Wells and thence to Stapledon, Bradbury, Lovecraft and C.A. Smith.

It seemed a rather odd progression to me, and I queried him. "Heinlein? Van Vogt?"

He seemed perturbed at this! No, he pointed out. His predilection in these fields had always leaned to the sheer fantasy and the outré. From his earliest youth he had seemed possessed—even *harried*—by a preternatural perception on the very verge of fulfillment.

Thus in recent years he had become a recognized figure in the field of dimensional hypothesis; but it was recognition with a taint because he called himself a mystic as well. His treatises on the probability of other worlds, dimensional worlds, contained evidence of tangential mystic thought, but so plausible were his theories that few contemporaries dared dispute them. Consequently they ignored them!

"Fire," he said. "And storm," he echoed. "Storm reacts inside me like a catalyst! Can you un-

derstand that, Dr. Sherman? It harries my thoughts and pursues my mind until I possess a spirit of—of—" He floundered for words. "There's a feeling I'm about to *accomplish* incredible things, and yet I remain helpless on the threshold. I tell you it becomes sentient! I am permitted to *hear* things, as if—as if each of my atoms were attuned to another dimension!"

"You say—permitted?"

He nodded, staring fixedly into the fire.

"All right," I said, and I observed him carefully. "Would you care to tell me about the things you hear."

ONCE MORE the trembling came, together with that look of despair and helpless longing.

"Music! And it's a violin, always. But so different, so unutterably beautiful that I know it can't be of this world. And just as storm causes me to hear, so does fire cause me to see—as if flame were the gateway, a tangent into other planes. . . ." There was pleading in his voice. "And might it not be? Hasn't fire the power to transmute a block of wood into a different state of being—heat and energy, a higher vibration, the vibration that's the basis of all things? Lately I've felt myself so near, I was almost able to— to—"

"To make the transition," I nodded. I hadn't the heart to tell him this was common practice among certain adepts and laymen too, while in the grip of religious or emotional fervor. "Go on, Maxton. What are the things you . . . see?"

"Im not sure. Except that it's always the same scene! Another world, vague distances—a grassy vista reaching away, with trees bordering in the background—strange looking trees beneath a yellow sky. No movement, no sight of any living thing, but across this place comes the sound of the violin! It seems nearer each time, yet I have the feeling that *I'm approaching the music* rather than it approaching me. Then—there comes an unbearable longing, and I know that one of these days—"

Frantically, he seized my arm "Tell me, tell me! I *must* be mad. Isn't it true? Or could it be that I'm constituted unlike other people, that my eyes and ears actually *see and hear vibrations* out of our plane. I must know! Is it all of my mind, or do I really have that power?"

I could not answer the poor fellow's questions! He had presented himself so convincingly that I found myself caught up in it, gripped by a new and staggering concept—tbe idea that tbose whom we call mad, particularly those who *see and hear* things

when there is naught to see and hear, might actually have a different mechanism attuned to vibrations beyond the temporal—

That Joan of Arc for example —and there were innumerable others—who saw visions and heard voices, *might have actually been in contact with another existing plane—*

That some percentage, at least, of those poor unfortunates in our institutions . . .?

No! I caught myself up just in time. Beyond any doubt, there was in Maxton's fantasy the definite aspect of subliminal resentment (witness the disregard of his theories and writings by his contemporaries in the field)—but what was far more interesting to me, *subliminal stimulus* as well! Could it be that such a brilliant thinker as Maxton was a victim of his own convictions, to the extent that he induced these illusions by way of "proving" his postulates about other-dimensional worlds?

"You've mentioned this as a recurring thing," I said. "Tell me, when did it all begin?"

"Over a year ago! There was only a hint of it then, but it becomes stronger each time."

"Both visually and audibly?"

He nodded.

"And this . . . other-worldly violin. You say it's always the same instrument? How do you know it's the same?"

"Because it's still the same melody! Didn't I explain? An initial melody that hasn't ended yet! I've heard it half a dozen times, there's always a series of progressive chords—weaving a slow pattern—" He paced the room, and there was eagerness now. "I have a theory about it! This other dimension impinges on ours, but it has a rate of vibration infinitely faster. So that a simple melody to a person of that world, say the violin-player herself, *would encompass a year of time as we know it!* I feel it's coming to a close, that melody."

"And then? What do you feel will happen?"

"I don't know!" He paused abruptly, turned to face me and tried to smile. "But it's different than a year ago. I've felt it each time. Not so much fear as—an excitement, a yearning! There's something to come, something vast, and I know that melody is only a prelude. . . ."

I knocked the ash from my pipe and slowly refilled it. The man was a paradox! In his narration he had vacillated from fear to distress to harassment, then in doubt, and from there to a subdued sort of eagerness that bordered on expectancy. Talking it out with me had brought about the transition, but somehow I could not believe this had been his intent at all.

We left it there. Professionally my approach had been less than semi-analytic, my curiosity far removed from the insatiable; but this casual attitude did not seem to bother Maxton as it does most, who dangle their "gift" of neurotic functioning in front of the analyst wanting some assurance that the sacrifice will be worth while! Maxton was perfectly composed and certainly rational when he left me that night—but I can't say as much for my own state of mind.

Almost, it was as if our roles had been reversed. The usual answers would not apply! Wasn't Maxton's fantasy merely that—a fantasy—devious to be sure but nevertheless a projected wish-fulfillment? Fixation made real and visual and audible due to stress of study and over-work? The subliminal stimulus now manifest as a self-assertive impulse?

No! I could not accept it. Now it was *I* who felt uneasy and disturbed, dissatisfied in a way I had never experienced.

And contributing to this was a factor I had to pin-point! There was something Maxton had said —a thing—a mere mention that escaped me in passing, but I knew it was important now. And like a peck in a drink that bobs and eludes, it eluded me now.

Gradually I relaxed, took my mind away, and as so often happens it popped at once to the surface. I remembered!

Something he had said, just a little thing—*a single word merely, but now it loomed large with implication!*

DR. SHERMAN paused in his telling. Not for so mundane a reason as dramatic effect! His gaze was beyond me, not in present time and space, and be was obviously unaware that he had a visitor.

I glanced at his bands. They were clenched until the knuckles showed white. I waited, and slowly he relaxed, leaning back in his chair as the words came again.

Philip Maxton! I saw him but twice after that. It was some five weeks later that I attended a forum on "Therapy and the Metaphysical Impact," or some such nonsensical thing—the woods are full of these pseudo-discussion groups who sound and expound. I told myself I was interested, but I suppose I attended solely in the hope Maxton would be there. One of the sub-topics was "Vibration and the Structural Dimensions."

Of course Maxton was there. He greeted me in not too pleased a manner, and for the rest of the evening managed to avoid me. His own exposition on the sub-topic was interesting enough but

not new, in fact was a summation of his earliest themes, and nowhere did he touch upon the topic he had broached to me. Not until the close of the session did I manage to get him aside.

"Maxton! You may consider this unprofessional as hell—I do myself—but I've got to ask you. Has it happened again? Please believe me, I've got to know!"

He seemed reluctant to talk about it, and I knew at once that something *had* happened; it was obvious he had experienced his phenomenon again. (Note that I was no longer thinking of it as a noumenal!)

"During our last talk," I pursued, "you mentioned a thing I haven't been able to forget. You said there was no sight of any living thing in this other dimension, but then you remarked about the violin-player *herself!*" I paused, watching him. *"Why did you signify the feminine?"*

"What? But I didn't say that! I couldn't—"

"Maxton. You did say it, I assure you."

He stared at me, eyes wide with genuine shock. "But that means I must have known . . . heaven help me, even then! Even before—"

I spoke very carefully. "Of course. From the very beginning you knew. And since then, you *have* seen her. Isn't that it? Now you are sure."

"Seen her? Yes—how can I ever forget! The barest glimpse only, but I *am* sure! I begin to see the purpose now, the reason for the melody. She needs me, she wants me, just as I—"

His voice was almost a sob. Desire was there, and longing was there, the desire and longing of a man who has seen a vision and finds it suddenly attainable! Then Maxton caught himself sharply; there was a change across his face, a guarded caution as he looked at me, as if he feared that somehow I might invade his private domain!

I placed a hand upon his shoulder, and the trembling of his body seemed to quiet.

"Philip," I said softly. "First of all you must understand that my interest in this thing is purely clinical. You do know that?" He nodded. "So, it will happen again. And perhaps again. And when those times come, we'll discuss it very thoroughly; no doubt you'll have much more to tell. Agreed?"

Again he nodded, but I'm not at all sure that he heard. It was apparent that *time* for him had a quite separate and personal connotation.

But I knew I would see Philip Maxton again, and I did . . . for the last time.

IT WAS a month later when he came again to my home. He

was a changed man, gaunt and hollow-cheeked with a terrible tiredness about him. But the real difference was in his eyes! Again a paradox. A brilliance was there, a consuming eagerness, nothing now of distress.

It was quite apparent that he looked to me for neither solution nor solace . . . but why had he come?

It was again a night of storm. It had been building up all day along the coast. I could hear the rush of wind around the Heights and I pictured the waves below, kicking across the bay in mad turmoil against the cliffs. Yes, I could almost see it—and before Maxton was through with me that night I was to see and feel it too!

He talked, now, with an unleash of feeling as if he knew there was little time and he was compelled to let me know.

"Remember, Dr. Sherman. You must promise to remember! Whatever happens, my theories of the dimensions are correct. I shall prove them tonight. I've been close, so close, but most important of all *I have seen her!*"

I cannot say that then, or at any time, I comprehended one-tenth of what was going on in Maxton's mind or the depth of emotion that stirred him. His theme was the same, but now there was something else; almost, it was as if his mind were hung suspended and I caught its quivering.

". . . and she's aware that I listen! Do you remember what I told you about the music? My feeling that I'm approaching *it* rather than it approaching me? Well, it's true, I know that now, and I feel the melody's coming to a close." He was staring into the fire with an intensity that alarmed me. I started to go to him, but he continued:

"Pre-destination. Do you believe in that? The direct pattern of occurence in our lives? It's more than a phrase of the mystics! I'm convinced that my entire life, all the course of my studies have been directed toward the moment when I might penetrate the barrier and reach *her* . . ."

Heaven help me, but I found myself caught up by his convictions, the utter loneliness and longing in Maxton's voice! Part of his spell was on me, something of storm and fire and his terrible desire. His voice went on. It must have been minutes. Then abruptly, I caught the sudden sharp tremor that engulfed him.

I might have stopped it! I might have contained him! But it was too late now, for I felt it too . . . something there in the room with the two of us, a thing illogical and nameless and yet palpable as the scent of fear.

It was *silence* I was aware of,

and yet it was a sound that brought me back. A tiny sound as if a log in the fireplace had snapped. I glimpsed Maxton, dimly, but there was a difference now; for the merest instant a haze touched the room and a flame leaped once.

Cold dread dragged at my spine. I couldn't move, and my eyes seemed—

WHAT I seemed to see behind the flame was a great rolling vista of another world with strange grass, lurid-hued, leaping waist high. And then there was no mistaking it. *I saw her.*

With that glimpse, my heart lurched into my throat with terrible longing, and I knew something of what Maxton meant.

She stepped very delicately across the terrain as if not wishing to break the spell. Her face was bowed low across a stringed instrument, upon which she played with a sweeping and heart-felt effort. She was shapely, she was desirable, but more than anything else it was the sound of the music that held me.

Compelling, Maxton had said? It was more! All time seemed to stop. Certainly my heart had stopped. I stood transfixed, as her arm swept across the strings in a final prolonged crescendo that reached and grasped and tugged.

It was then that fear rose to my throat, the sort of fear one experiences when entering a nightmare-dream where evil lurks.

I remember staggering back. I glimpsed Maxton through a glaucous haze and I thought I heard his voice. The music was reaching the end, on a low sustained chord. Beside the maiden, the tall grass rustled in an unfelt breeze. Something—a great furry shape, red jowled, with strange disjointed limbs—rose up from the grass as if impatiently awaiting the moment; apparently it was some pet of hers.

And still she played, drawing out that final strain, swaying a little forward as she peered . . .

It was then that I saw her face.

It was faintly furred and aquiline, her eyes red and purposeful beneath evilly arched brows, nostrils thin and distended with devilish satisfaction at a deed well done. Lips cruel in a thin slash, but quirked at the corners as if ready to burst into a chortle of glee. A demoniac face, a female face out of hell!

But that was not the real horror. The horror was when Maxton screamed.

I saw him then, or part of him . . . seemingly *behind* the flames, being drawn and diminished by the last strains of that devil's violin. A horrible transformation was taking place. I saw his body become furry, then slowly alien—

shapeless—as his limbs disappeared into vague wavering appendages. There seemed to be three figures now: still the girl, and her beast, and something half hidden, something that was partly Philip Maxton.

It was his eyes I saw, his eyes to the last. Twice more he screamed and each time it sounded different; then something, thick and gutteral and not quite human, certainly not a scream.

It was *then* there came the singing snap of the string beneath her hands, jarring my senses. She looked with quick alarm at the broken instrument, then at a spot in my direction. Apparently she saw Maxton, for she leered and seemed vastly pleased.

She reached down and touched her pet, that shapeless furry beast. Her lips moved, addressing it, and I'm sure I heard the words thin and muted:

"There! You see, it did work, and we have another. A companion! You need never be lonely any more . . ."

They turned, the two of them, and walked away into the lurid grass. I thought I saw another similarly tentacled beast slink along behind . . . hesitant . . . frightened and a little bewildered. But I could not be sure. A log in the fireplace snapped, a flame gushed out and the scene fast faded away.

SHERMAN'S story was finished. For a long while he sat hunched forward, oblivious, staring at the floor as if still caught in the spell. As for me—there were no words I could say. I had come for the story, and I had it.

Dumbly I rose and crossed the room. His window faced upon the expanse of lawn and shrubbery that flanked the huge building. Bright sunlight bathed the grounds, and I saw them down there—the others. They strolled harmlessly, mostly by themselves, or just sat on the benches enjoying the sun. Vacant but content.

My face twisting with concern, I came away from the window. "Doctor Sherman . . ."

He didn't hear, he seemed quite unaware of my presence. Then, from just inside the doorway someone called to me. The attendant—Roberts, I think he said his name was. I realized he must have been waiting near by all the while.

I hurried to him. "Is he—will he be all right?"

"Quite all right," Roberts assured me.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have—"

"No, quite the contrary. We're happy you came! His symptoms are not distressing, but there *are* inhibitory factors; occasionally he needs such an assertive outflow. Makes him more amenable to treatment."

"Will he ever—you know—be the same again?"

Roberts considered it. "Perhaps, in time. Perhaps never. This is an absolutely unprecedented case."

I took a last look about the room. It was small but comfortably furnished. My gaze stopped at a row of volumes. "He still has his books!"

"Oh, yes. Sherman is very special here."

I stepped over to the books, and Roberts came quickly beside me. "Don't touch them! Ordinarily he's quite rational, but he becomes frantic if anyone—"

So I merely looked. They were thin books, obviously the sort that are privately printed, but the titles were impressive. *Vibration and the Structural Dimensions*, by Philip Maxton. *Patterns of Flux: An Observation*, by Philip Maxton. There were a dozen others in similar vein, all by Maxton.

Something struck me now, a sudden grotesque thought. I gasped, but couldn't bring myself to voice it. "I don't understand!" I said. "His story seemed so real, but there's still something I can't quite . . . all this business about Philip Maxton . . ."

Roberts looked at me, not smiling. "I think you understand, all right. Certainly you don't suppose the thing happened? Or that there ever was a Philip Maxton? These are all Sherman's works He wrote the stuff himself."

I nodded, and now I was aware that Doctor Sherman had raised his head. He was watching us closely. Perhaps he had heard the word "Maxton."

Something triggered him. Rising, he walked over and extended a hand to me. It was warm and firm and friendly. "You mustn't go yet," he said. "Don't you remember? There is something I promised to show you. The golden string! The string from the violin."

He seemed quite rational again as he stepped to a table, opened the drawer and took out a tiny lacquered box. He reached into the box and carefully brought up his hand, finger and thumb extended; his eyes were needle bright, his mien exultant. Here was irrefutable proof!

I peered, and my breatb caught in my throat. For a moment I actually saw it, I was positive, the thin golden strand twisting like a thing alive beneath his fingers.

Almost . . . and then I peered again and knew.

There was no string in his fingers. There was nothing there at all. Nothing . . .

THE END

MULBERRY MOON

By ARTHUR PORGES

Lovers no longer walked beneath this moon. For, since the rocket landed, a strange deformity was gestating there, crisscrossing the lunar surface until it looked like a ripe berry, ready to burst.

AT ONE end of the laboratory a scintillating light, at first faint and irregular, steadied to a rich, even glow. Walt Tremayne stiffened, and the gas hissed unheeded from the bunsen burner. As he watched, still holding a flaming match, the intensity increased until the beaker shot a beam of white light to the discolored ceiling.

Elder, gaping over the luminous solution, uttered a choked exclamation: "Walt!"

"God, yes!" Tremayne replied to the unspoken question, reaching mechanically to turn off the gas. "I see it, all right. Be blind not to. Even with all that light coming through the windows. What's going on there, anyway? I thought you were messing with assorted eggs."

"I was—I was. Just using chemicals to start development. My investigation of artificial parthenogenesis. And all of a sudden this thing blossomed under my nose. It's—" He broke off abruptly, stared at his partner, and they cried in almost perfect unison:

"The Army rocket—!"

"That moon rocket offer—!"

They laughed.

"Walt," Elder said, suddenly

grave, "I'm not kidding. Just look at that stuff shine. A regular damn searchlight, so help me. Have you ever seen anything like it? I've studied fluorescence in animals; I know all the standard chemicals for producing cold light. I tell you, we've hit on something big."

"Ten thousand bucks." Walt sucked in his breath. "Say, with dough like that we could make a real lab out of this crummy place. A decent centrifuge, not that asthmatic buzz-bomb we've been struggling with."

"Hell with that. You mean a good phase microscope."

"Over my dead body, pal. For that matter, we could spend the whole ten grand on glassware, and still not have enough for both of us." An anxious expression appeared in his eyes. "Sure you can do it again?" he demanded. "Hope you know what was in that beaker."

"Ouch! You are so right. It shouldn't have happened. Kurzin didn't say a word about luminescence—and nobody could miss it." He seized the beaker of still-glowing solution, and studied it. Brows knitted, he dipped a glass rod, and touched it to his tongue. "So that's it," he muttered.

"That's what?" Walt snapped.

"I goofed—but a goof that may give us ten thousand dollars. By mistake I used a beaker with a few drops of ammonium chloride solution in it. That must be what set off the diamino-ortho-phenylazide."

"The what?"

"You heard me. It's a new chemical. Kurzin sent me a few grams from La Jolla last week. Claims it's great stuff for the artificial development of echinoderm eggs. Mighty lucky the old boy didn't get any of his contaminated with an ammonium salt, or our chance at that prize money would be zero minus."

"You mean that's all it takes—ammonium chloride and tongue-twister?"

"If my guess is right. And only a one per cent solution, too. Stuff's real potent. Anyhow, we'll soon know—here goes again."

With practised dexterity the biologist added the chloride to the pink liquid in a liter erlenmeyer, and the two men waited tensely. Pinpoints of light appeared in the mixture; they coalesced into larger blobs, and within a few seconds a glorious white glow permeated the fluid. They watched it in ecstatic silence.

"Persistent, too," Walt gloated. "See, your first batch is just fading out. Maybe we've solved the whole cold light mystery—licked the fireflies at their own game; wouldn't that be nice?"

"I like that 'we'," Elder snorted. "Where's the paper? Ah." He

flipped the pages. "Here's all the dope. 'Army offers prize for new fluorescent.' He began to read the lead paragraph aloud, Tremayne peering over his shoulder. "'A prize of $10,000 in cash has just been offered by the Army for a powerful new fluorescent suitable for use in their moon probe, due to be fired in a few months. It is hoped that such a fluorescent, light in weight, and more effective than any now known, will enable the rocket's arrival to be seen from the earth. This was not true of the Russian attempt, and success on our part would restore some of the prestige lost. Anybody wishing to submit a new fluorescent for the prize contest may make an appointment with Dr. Joseph Hamilton. If satisfied, he will convene the Technical Committee for a demonstration—'"

"Marshall." Walt tugged at his arm. "Better not get too excited. There could be a lot of work to this before we're ready to ask for an appointment. And we'd better get rolling; there's none too much time."

"All right," Elder said airily. "We'll make the stuff from scratch. Or rather you will. Can you do it? Make Kurzin's compound from the structural formula, all simon pure?"

"I'm a chemist. Anything anybody else can put together, I can, too." He winked. "Especially when they give nice, simple cookbook directions in large type."

"Kurzin says he got the process out of the latest Journal. Oh, damn—why did you cancel your subscription?"

"Because I'd rather eat than read the *Journal of Organic Chemistry*," Walt replied in an injured tone. "Unprofessional though it may sound. We'll just borrow Jim Keelyn's copy. Wonder how big a job it is." He looked about the barren room ruefully. "Will we need any fancy equipment?"

"Better not; that's all I can say," Elder replied sarcastically. "If it can be done with—let me see—two flasks; one cracked; three test-tubes, all dirty; and Cavendish's original balance—"

"All right," Tremayne groaned. "Knock it off. We've got things to do. You get that Journal from Jim, and I'll start cleaning up this mess in preparation for a little organic synthesis. We'll see what develops."

Out of a black, airless sky the needle pointed rocket fell towards the waiting moon. The last of three stages, it had left the first and second far behind, and now, at a fall from infinity velocity of nearly two miles a second, was about to crash. Inside the gold-plated nose cone were twenty-five pounds of the Elder-Tremayne prize-winning

fluorescent, just mixed into radiant life by automatic controls. Back on the earth, trained eyes stared anxiously at the moon's shadowed fraction.

At Palomar the observer left the great Hale telescope puzzled and annoyed. He reported only a faint, momentary glow, and no other observatory was willing to confirm.

"I really think the Army made it this time," he told an assistant. "The telemetering seemed to prove it. But evidently the fluorescent didn't perform as planned. Wonder if they made sure it worked without air. Then again," he added, "if the crust is really a deep layer of pumice, or dust, the nose may have buried itself completely. In that case, no matter how the stuff glowed, we couldn't see it at all. Damned shame. No skin off me, but I hate to see so much dough and months of preparation down the drain." Frowning, he returned to his study of more distant phenomena.

The controversy among the astronomers about the moon's surface was still active a month later, when—

"Walt, did you see this?"

"What?"

"Trenches on the moon! The paper says they're digging trenches on the moon."

"Lay off, will you. Go play with the new centrifuge if you're feeling kittenish. Put your head in it; maybe that'll settle your brains."

"I'm serious," Elder said. "This is no gag. It's right here. All the big scopes have spotted them. Say, what if there *is* intelligent life up there? It can't be so; every biologist knows that; and yet . . . what would we do if a rocket from some other planet smacked us?"

Walt placed the burette carefully on a clean towel, and turned. "You mean 'they' are afraid of attack—invasion—by us?"

"Sure, why not? First a probe; then a landing by people. Why else would they be digging trenches all of a sudden. They're scared, I'll bet. They've crisscrossed the whole moon with 'em, and the astronomer's say they're deepening 'em every day. We ought to reassure the Lunars—or is it Lunatics? Tell 'em we're peaceful—between wars, that is."

"Look," Walt protested. "They can't be trenches. You couldn't see them on the moon. They're only a few feet wide. Be like needle scratches on a medicine ball."

"Sounds reasonable. All I say is, it gives one furiously to think. There must be life up there—intelligent life. If it were Mars, you'd fall back on the big irrigation project; but on the moon

—no air, no water, no nothing. It simply doesn't make any sense."

"Let's see the paper," Walt demanded. "Hmmph. Doesn't look like trenches to me. More like a generalized coordinate system—curvilinear coordinates. Or even like a golf ball." He chuckled. "Army honors ex-President-General by turning moon into huge golf ball—what's the matter? You're pale as a sheet."

"Nothing," Elder muttered, the color flooding back to his face. "I was just reminded of something. Does that sketch look to you anything like—well, a mulberry, for example?"

"A mulberry! Man, you really want to top my golf ball, I can see that. Doesn't look like any—yeah, maybe it does, when you hold it like this. It could be some kind of a berry, I suppose. Me, I wouldn't know a mulberry from a farkleberry. You're the farm boy. Anyway, what about it?"

"Nothing," Elder repeated doggedly. "It was just a crazy notion. Too silly to talk about. Forget it. Let's get back to work. I'll give you a hand with the calorimeter while my sections are dehydrating."

"Elder's got a real sourball on," Tremayne was complaining. "Walks around in a daze lately. You can't talk to the guy without getting your head snapped off. Customers are scarce enough for new testing labs without that. Damned if I don't think he's actually worried about the moon invading us over that rocket we sent up at 'em."

Keelyn eyed him gravely. "Is that so impossible?" he drawled. "Plenty of activity up there all of a sudden. Normally they say the moon hardly changes in thousands of years. A tiny new crater appears, or something fades out a little. Now it's fantastic. They must have the whole population at work on a ninety hour week. Or some incredible earth-moving machinery."

"You, too!" Walt groaned. "That's absured. Why, nobody's ever even seen a light on the moon. No cities; what the hell kind of a civilization could that be?"

"Owls get along in the dark."

"Oh, for Pete's sake! If you're worried about an invasion by Lunar owls, you can relax. I positively guarantee that our military forces can defeat any number of owls. We are in perfect shape, in spite of a penny-pinching government—against owls."

"No; seriously. I just meant that if they can get along without air and water, why not without light. We mustn't try to fit all intelligent life into the one pattern we happen to know about."

"So they live in the dark,

maybe underground. But trenches; that's pretty silly. They'd know that trenches would be useless against modern weapons. What'll you bet it turns out to be volcanic activity? Maybe that rocket triggered some instability in the crust."

"What rocket? We can't even be sure it hit. Besides, the moon is battered with meteors all the time. *They* never triggered anything. You haven't explained a thing. Ah, here's Elder—what's your theory, Marshall?"

He glared at them wearily out of reddened eyes. "I don't know," he mumbled, his unshaven face sullen. "But we'll all learn more pretty soon—three weeks, I make it, if the proportion holds."

"What in blazes are you babbling about," Walt demanded, real concern in his voice. "You all right, Marshall? I still think you ought to see Dr. Lewis—"

"Can it, will you. I'm all right. We'll see who's crazy." He stalked out, muttering.

Keelyn whistled softly. "Say, he *is* bad. When did this start?"

Walt shrugged. "About two weeks ago, I think." He reflected, his brow furrowed; then said uneasily: "I see a little light now. Wonder what's up his sleeve. See this?" He held up the paper. "That beadline: 'Science Agog Over Mulberry Moon.'"

"What about it?"

"Marshall was jabbering to me about mulberries before these guys saw anything up there but trenches. And that's about the time he began acting so queer. His research has gone to pot, but good. No interest any more."

"Maybe he's unhappy because the fluorescent didn't work. Some of the papers were pretty nasty. Claimed the Army threw away that ten thousand."

"Who says it didn't work?" Walt snapped, bristling. "How do we know the rocket ever got there? Or about the control? Hell, we *know* the stuff works. We've rechecked fifty times."

"Then what's bothering Marshall?"

"I don't know," Tremayne admitted. "But maybe he's on to something the big brains have missed. He's rather lucky that way—look at the fluorescent, for example. I haven't done my duty; too wrapped up in work. I'll get after him tonight. If he knows anything, I'll pry it out if I have to use torture. That's a promise."

There was a derisive sniff, and they whirled, red-faced. Elder stood there, an ironic smile on his lips.

"So you still want my theory, is that it? Okay. But one laugh, and I'll slay you. Don't go, Jim—you might as well certify my insanity, too.

"You're wondering about that mulberry business. Mulberry

Moon. Very catchy and alliterative. Do you know the Latin for mulberry? Thought not; you're chemists, bararians. Well, it's 'morula.' Schoolkids learn it, or used to, in freshman science." He chuckled humorlessly.

"What the devil are you getting at?" Walt said. He exchanged uneasy glances with Keelyn. There wasn't much doubt. Marshall was in bad shape.

"We'll see who's nuts," Elder snapped, stung. He wrenched open a thick book, and pointed to a large, graphic sketch. "What does that look like to you?"

"Not a book about it already," Walt marvelled.

"Can't you read?" the biologist growled. "It's not a book about 'it' at all. This text has been out for years."

Tremayne gaped at the sketch, reading the caption in complete bewilderment. Then his jaw snapped shut, and he clapped one hand to his head in a theatrical gesture.

"Damn it!" he roared. "You're not suggesting seriously—!"

"Yes, I am!" Elder shouted him down. "What do we know about space, or the moon either, for that matter? All we have to work with is reflected light and a few differential equations of motion. So the moon's a little less dense than the earth. It's pitted and rough. Well, so is many a fruit-pit, for that matter. What if the surface is this or that mineral—maybe. An oyster shell's calcium carbonate; that's a mineral, isn't it?"

Keelyn made a faint sound of protest deep in his throat. He placed the book gently upon a lab bench.

"Shut up and listen," Elder flashed at him. "I'll hear your objections later. I know 'em all, anyway. I've been making them to myself for days. Now what if millions of years ago, something —and don't ask me what—spread the moon, the asteroids, and even the planets, in the same way a salmon lays eggs? Suppose they never got fertilized."

"Why not the sun, too?" Walt gulped. "Why so modest?"

"Too hot. Only the cooler bodies. No real proof they ever were very hot. And even if so—well, some crustaceans live in near-boiling water. And besides, anything alive has some heat. A hen's egg must be red-hot compared to a stone. Temperature's relative like everything else."

"But the size!" Keelyn protested.

"Hang the size! A cyclops, so small you need a good lens to see it clearly, lays eggs. So does an ostrich. Or better, so did the Moa. I'll bet a Moa's egg is just as large in relation to a Cyclop's egg as the moon is to a Moa's egg. Anyway, you get my point."

Walt said: "How could anything live in space for millions of years? The cold; lack of oxygen, and—"

"Don't make me laugh. Anthrax spores will lie in the ground fifty years, winter and summer, and after being boiled for an hour, wipe out a herd of cattle. Just give them the right environment and a little time. That's all it takes."

"But the moon's not getting any bigger."

"Why should it? You're thinking of certain kinds of eggs. Did you ever watch a frog's egg develop? It doesn't change in bulk, at least not to any extent. Same with many insect eggs. All you see are cleavage lines deepening, and when the grub appears, it's roughly the size of the egg itself."

"So when *this* hatches—?"

"Yes," Elder said grimly. "Only moon size; no larger." He hrushed back a strand of hair with fingers that shook. "At first."

"If I understand you," Walt said, "you're actually implying that our fluorescent started that —that egg developing."

"You bet it did. You saw how those starfish eggs reacted to the most dilute solution. No milt ever did any better."

"So that's why there was no flash. The crust was soft, and the rocket punched right in."

"Exactly. Like pin-pricking an egg to start development."

"There's no proof," Keelyn said weakly. "It's all speculation."

"Proof's coming," was Elder's reply. He reached for the hiology text. "Tbe next stage—" He tured the page. "There it is." They looked at the sketch, then at each other, and were silent.

(From the Diary of James Keelyn)

Marshall was right. The thing has reached the blastula stage, and much faster than predicted, although the concave portion is still small and shallow.

Walt and Marshall have stopped clowning; in a way that's very significant to anyone who knows them. They are preparing a summary of the facts which they plan to present privately to certain top scientists and government officials. They are not hopeful about it. What can earth do? The rocket took many months to prepare, and even with a hydrogen war-head would he too small for the joh.

Already the quality of moonlight has changed. It has a purplish tinge, and for some reason—is it the roughening of the surface?—is much dimmer. Do they still make love under this ghastly moon?

I wonder if the thing might

not abort. Maybe after so many millions of frozen, airless years, it will fail to mature, remaining in the blastula or gastrula stage. But Marshall showed us anthrax spores under the microscope. They shone brightly, so much like tiny moons themselves. He has it right—as far as anybody knows these spores could resume their active state after a thousand years.

No, it will not abort. The vitality of so many years is not easily destroyed.

What Behemoth will hatch from that devil's egg? Will it spread monstrous, utterly impossible wings, and flap off into space? Or will it prowl the solar system as a beast of prey prowls the feeding ground of its birth?

THE END

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The cavern in the Himalayan mountains had kept its secret well for thousands of years. But archeologists are determined men. They have an urge to be . . .

DISCOVERERS

By HENRY SLESAR

Illustrator DOUGLAS

March 19. Tourist tip: next time you're in Pakistan, stay at the Dean's Hotel in Peshawar. I arrived here yesterday afternoon at the invitation of Dr. Marston Baylor, and was promptly shown a suite of rooms with two baths and an enormous fireplace, a typical accommodation. After four months in the desert, a little luxury wasn't unwelcome, and neither was a little brandy. This was dispensed by a giant Pathan at the bar downstairs. The Pathans, of course, being Moslems, wouldn't touch the filthy stuff themselves, but they served it cheerfully enough. By the time Dr. Baylor arrived, I was pretty cheerful myself.

He looked no different than my memory of him when he walked into the lofty old Club of the hotel; he had the same jaunty, slightly bandy-legged walk, the same round, ruddy face. There was a stranger with him, a lean, muscular man with fair skin and yellow bair. Dr. Baylor introduced him as Warner Cooke-Yarborough, a fellow gravedigger. He gave me a brisk handshake, a clipped British greeting, and we settled into a corner of the club and got down to business. "Understand you've been working in the Punjab," Dr. Baylor said, "with the MacMorris party." His eyes glowed with curiosity, and I satisfied it by relat-

ing the failure of the search. He took no pleasure in learning of it; there was no envy in the Doctor. "How would you like another assignment?" he said. "Something a little different?"

I couldn't help smiling. "They're always different, but I'm willing to listen."

"Have you ever heard of the cave of Kasher?"

"Only vaguely."

"It's more legend than anything else," Cooke-Yarborough said dryly. "It's supposed to be somewhere in the foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Afghan storytellers have filled it full of hobgoblins."

"I've heard of Kara Kamar," I said. "The Black Belly. Some fine discoveries there."

"Kara Kamar isn't in the same league," Dr. Baylor said with a chuckle. "Not if our information is correct. There was a preliminary dig early this year, by Dr. Samish, but his party was unable to break through to the interior. However, we've examined the site and believe there's another entrance. It's our belief that the Cave of Kashar is no ordinary cave; we think it's a cavern."

"An enormous cavern," the blond man said, with a hint of guarded enthusiasm. "Something on the order of Carlsbad, a subterranean cavern of incredible size."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Spelunking isn't exactly in my line. You know me, Doctor, I've always preferred the fresh air."

Dr. Baylor smiled engagingly. "So have I. But for a really unique discovery, Tod, it shouldn't matter, should it?"

"How fine a discovery do you expect?"

The Doctor looked at the Englishman, who flushed. "It seems to us that the limestone formations have formed caves that would have been inhabited by hunters of the Pleistocene era. And if it really is a cave-system, it might well have housed thousands of them, a veritable community."

"We've had Carbon-14 dating on some charcoal samples," the Doctor said. "It looks highly encouraging. And it's all virgin territory, Tod, a candy store full of archaeological goodies. We've already lined up a party of five, but we need a good foreman. That is your specialty, isn't it?"

I ordered another brandy. Half an hour later, we shook hands, and I became a member of the Kashar Expedition.

March 26. It's been less than a week since the formation of our party, and the quarrels have started already. It's the penalty of having everything run so smoothly; a few difficulties might have unified us. We left

Peshawar on the morning of the 21st, in a stock car and two jeeps, bound for Kabul. We made the Khyber Pass in a few hours, and the Pakistani Border guards passed us through without even a glance at our baggage. Then we were on the mountain paths, climbing six thousand feet into breathtaking scenery, the snows frosting the peaks of the Hundu Krush, the valleys in a patchwork of emerald green. We made Kabul just before dark. Dr. Baylor had anticipated bureaucratic slowdowns, but we were received with warm friendliness at the American Embassy, and even told where we could get our hands on a supply of precious gasoline. All in all, the expedition was running into too damn much good luck; there had to be a change.

There was. On the second day in Kabul, I learned that two of the men Dr. Baylor bad hired, members of the Durrani clan, were mortal enemies even though they had never met before; their family vendetta went back a century. Another Afghan quit the expedition after a quarrel with Cooke-Yarborough over some missing equipment. Then just to make it perfect, Dr. Baylor and the Englishman had a few hot words of their own, developing out of a calm discussion of their favorite topic. I didn't hear the argument, but Dr. Baylor described it to me later. "These amateur diggers," he sneered. "It's an adventure to them, and that's all. They want to be Columbuses. They don't care a fig about serving science; they just want to find Noah's ark, or the Missing Link, and be rich and famous for it."

I rubbed my jaw and said nothing. If tbat was Cooke-Yarborough's attitude, I couldn't criticize it. It was pretty much my own. As a boy, I'd dreamed of unearthing Pharoah's tomb, of discovering the remains of Atlantis, of finding treasure coves and the remnants of biblical cities. If I had been born in earlier generation, I would have wanted to be an explorer; if I had been born later, I would have wanted to probe the mystery of Space. Neither was available to me so I had chosen to discover the past—not to serve science, but to serve my own ego. Even as Dr. Baylor talked, I was secretly pleased to find that I had a soulmate in my thin-lipped British colleague.

Later: Dr. Baylor and Cooke-Yarborough have made it up, if grudgingly. It's just as well; there are days of work ahead of us before we can make the trip north to the limestone country.

April 7. We bave found our cave at last, and we'll soon know if it was worth our difficulties.

Two days ago, our stock car broke down on the Shibar Pass and had to be abandoned along with its driver. I did the wise thing by leaving one of the feuding Durrani's behind, to break up any possible throat-cutting later on. But our party has been reduced to six, and the work ahead could well require a dozen. The entrance to the Cave of Kashar was located at mountain-goat height, a great cavity in the face of the steep white rock; we left the jeeps below and ascended in single file. From the distance, the mouth of the cave had yawned widely, but as we approached, we discovered that the roof had collapsed, leaving us several tons of limestone to dig out before we could make our entrance. It's taken us until this morning to clear the way, and after breakfast, Dr. Baylor, Cooke-Yarborough, and myself, will take the first step inside.

Later: The first trench has proved to be barren. Work has begun on the second trench, and I find it hard to believe that this solid, ancient rock is the doorway to a vast cavern. But Dr. Baylor is hopeful.

April 15. The breakthrough came at 11:40, and if no further discoveries emerge from our exploration of Kashar, this alone will assure our expedition a place in geological history. The Cave of Kashar has opened its ancient door for us, revealing the threshold of a vast cavern whose mysteries seem endless. It came during the excavation of the fourth trench, a chalk-choked hole that had us all coughing and cursing and almost ready to abandon the search. It was Cooke-Yarborough who first detected the faintly hollow sound of the inner wall; he worked it furiously with his pick, exhibiting a physical strength that surprised me. I ordered the natives to join him, and within two hours, when the white dust had cleared, we stepped through into a stone chamber that echoed and re-echoed our surprised shouts of triumph and excitement. Cooke-Yarborough, exhausted by his efforts, was ordered outside into the open air, and the Doctor and I took the first tentative steps into the interior of the cavern. Our lanterns gave us only a hint of the vastness ahead of us, and we know that it will take days and even weeks to explore the entire cavern. Tomorrow, we go inside.

Later: We celebrated tonight, and have named the cavern *Sesame.*

April 16. I am writing this in the bowels of *Sesame* itself, my page lit by the lantern at my side. The place I am in now is like a high-domed palace room, with giant stalactites hanging

from the ceiling like crystal chandeliers. Dr. Baylor and Cooke-Yarborough are already asleep, bundled into their blankets on the hard, gritty floor. The strange, sweet, dusty smell is still strong in the air about us, as it has been since we first entered this section of the cavern.

We made our entrance at seven a.m., leaving the three remaining members of our party to guard the jeeps and equipment on the mountain path below. We had wished for only one guard, thinking to take the other two men inside, but they were adamant in their refusal. I argued bitterly with them, but their stubbornness was rooted in both superstition and practical fear. Perhaps I can't blame them: who could be sure that our cavern roof wouldn't collapse in mid-exploration, or that it wouldn't contain noxious gasses that would kill us? As a matter of fact, the musty, ancient odor that filled many of the chambers was enough to give us all doubts as to the safety of our venture, and it was only after Dr. Baylor tested the air chemically that we dared to walk inside.

We have walked for almost a mile, through a multitude of intersecting passages that are like the street plan of an ancient stone city. There has been no time to search for fossils; we are too busy in pure exploration. After the fourth hour in the interior, we debated whether we should return to the cave mouth and continue the exploration the next day; it was Dr. Baylor who suggested that we spend the night here and continue in the morning. The "bedroom" we chose would do honor to a stone-age emperor, but I find it difficult to sleep. What further mystery will we uncover upon awakening?

April 17. I must record this now, in this place, at this hour. The thing we have found is so commonplace, and yet so terrible, that I think it may drive Dr. Baylor into insanity. We have no explanation, no theory, no answer for it, but as I look at the object in Cooke-Yarborough's hand, and hear his quiet, mirthless chuckle, and see the Doctor's ash-white face, I know that horror can come in the strangest and most ordinary forms.

The discovery came but one hour after we awakened from our deep sleep in the high-domed "room" of the cavern. Just before weariness overcame us, we had broken through a thin limestone wall that seemed to contain some bone fragments. After awakening, we returned to the wall and crawled through the aperture we had created to find ourselves in a magnificent carved chamber whose roof rose an incredible height, the giant

stalactites glistening like dripping diamonds overhead. But this awesome sight wasn't nearly as compelling as the half-buried object that faced us on the dusty floor. It was a human skeleton.

The Doctor gave an excited cry at the sight of it, and Cooke-Yarborough joined him in unearthing the fossilized bones. There was no doubt about its antiquity; even without archaeological training, I had seen enough human remains to know that the skeleton we had uncovered was many thousands of years old. For centuries, it had lain in its splendid mausoleum, waiting for its discoverers.

"A human skeleton," the Doctor breathed. "And in a wonderful state of preservation—"

"It's this dry air and ground," Cooke-Yarborough suggested. "How old would you say it was, Doctor?"

"Thousands of years, tens of thousands," Dr. Baylor said gleefully. "There may be many more such in the cavern; this may have been an underground dwelling place of prehistoric times; who can say?"

The petrified skul grinned at us.

"Here's something else," Cooke-Yarborough said, lifting what appeared to be a brown stone from the earth beside the skeleton. "Strange shape, isn't it?" The Doctor took it from his hand. "What do you make of it?"

I came to Dr. Baylor's side. He shrugged, and took a chisel from his canvas belt. He kneeled on the ground, and began to chip it carefully, until the encrusted layers of earth and rust were removed. It took some moments to understand what the object was, and even more moments to belive that we were seeing what we were seeing.

It was a cigarette lighter.

April 19. This is my last entry. I hope this journal will be discovered someday, and our remains treated courteously by those who find them.

We left *Sesame* six hours after our discovery of the cigarette lighter and its fossilized owner. By the time we reached the cave mouth, we were no longer on speaking terms. None of us had an explanation for our discovery; there was no possible way for the object to have been where it was. Then at one point, Dr. Baylor fell upon Cook-Yarborough with an unholy shriek, accusing his companion of playing a ghastly trick on him. It was the Englishman, after all, who had first picked up the object from the stone floor; the Doctor, unable to find an explanation for its presence, had decided that Cooke-Yarborough was playing a grisly game. I separated them in

time to prevent any violence, but found myself accusing the Englishman as well. He denied it vehemently, and his passionate argument was convincing. It was no prank. We had found a cigarette lighter that had lain in an unexplored cavern for many thousands of years, and that was the simple, inexplicable fact.

It was dusk by the time we found the cave mouth, and came out into the open air. The world seemed unnaturally quiet as we emerged, and the air was cooler than we had remembered it from the previous evenings. Slowly, we made our way down the face of the mountain towards the path where our jeeps and their three guards waited.

The path was empty.

At first, the explanation seemed simple: either we had been betrayed and robbed by the Afghans, or else they had become concerned by our overnight absence and gone back to the nearest village to locate help. I chose the latter explanation, believing in the honesty of our workers. The Doctor chose the first, and began cursing.

"It's no good wondering about it," Cooke-Yarborough said curtly. "We've got to use our heads and get out of here. We'll die of thirst or hunger if we don't find a village before too long."

"It's a good fifteen miles to the nearest one," I said. "Quite a trek. I think we should wait here for a bit—"

"No," the Doctor grumbled. "Cooke-Yarborough's right. They've turned tail on us, it's the only explanation. We'll have to go on foot.

We started down the path, heading for the plain below. Night was falling rapidly, the first stars already beginning to blink in the darkening sky. It took us well over an bour to reach level ground, and in the darkness, the crude road that led us back to the main bighways seemed strange and unfamiliar. We felt the first touch of panic, but none of us were willing to display it to the others. We began to walk.

"There may be cars along any minute," Cooke-Yarborough said. "Cars or wagons or something. We'll be all right."

"The roads so *empty*," Dr. Baylor muttered. "Ive never known it so empty. There seems to be nothing at all, for miles."

"We've got to be sure of our direction," I said. "It's too bad we didn't bring a compass—"

"There's one in the jeep," the Englishman said dryly. "But we could try the stars."

I searched the sky until I found the bright glitter of the Nortb Star. Dr. Baylor looked heavenward too, and his feet slowed to a halt. "'What is it?"

Cooke-Yarborough said harshly. "We don't have time for star gazing, Doctor . . ."

But he remained rooted, staring, his mouth opening and the lips moving. We watched him for a while, and then I put my hand on his arm. "Doctor," I said quietly, but he didn't seem to hear me. Cooke-Yarborough cursed, and threatened to go on without us, but then he, too, stopped and waited to learn what had frozen the Doctor in his path. Again, I tugged at the thin arm, and Dr. Baylor slowly lowered his gaze to meet mine. His expression shocked me; his eyes were vacant and staring, and his mouth slack as the mouth of an imbecile.

"What is it?" I said. "What's wrong, Doctor?"

"The stars . . ."

I looked at them.

"The stars are different," he said hoarsely. "The constellations."

Cooke-Yarborough snorted. "What kind of nonsense is that?"

"Different," the Doctor muttered. "All different."

"How?" I said. "How could they be different?"

"They've changed. The constellations are out of place. They've altered." He looked at me with more intelligence in his eyes, but his mouth was now smiling foolishly. "Well, that's the answer then," he said calmly. "That's what it is, of course."

"What is?"

"Time," he said. "Time has altered them. Don't you see?" He turned towards the Englishman, still smiling. "That explains everything, don't you see? It's no longer 1960. 1960 is dead. 1960 is gone."

"What are you talking about?"

"It would take thousands of years to change the stars this way. Tens of thousands. We've named the cavern wrongly, Tod, don't you understand? We should have called it Rip Van Winkle . . ." He laughed. He laughed so hard that he staggered and almost fell, the tears streaming down his ruddy cheeks. I caught him in time, and had the presence of mind to slap his face before he dissolved into hysteria. Then he was quiet.

So now we know. The strange, sweet, dusty smell of our cavern "bedroom" had been some underground gas, some incredible vapor with powers not of annihilation, but of preservation. The night we had spent in sleep had been a night ten thousand years long, a night in which we lay in suspended animation until the strange vapor had dissipated through the openings we our selves had created. In the "morning" we had awakened to find the remains not of prehistoric man, but the skeleton of a man

of our own time, perhaps a rescuer seeking our bodies, a rescuer who had been felled by what force we would never know (a fallen rock? a seizure of the heart?) and in his fall, had lost the artifact of his time—a cigarette lighter.

Now we are in the world of tomorrow, helpless and alone on a road that leads endlessly through wasteland. We have tired of walking; our throats are dry as the dust at our feet, and our limbs refuse movement. Somewhere beyond us lies the cities and the people of the future, but we can never reach them. The greatest of discoveries, undiscovered. **THE END**

COMING NEXT MONTH

The big news in the May FANTASTIC is the beginning of a fantasy reprint series.



Readers have been asking about this for many moons. Under the guidance of science-fantasy historian Sam Moskawitz, FANTASTIC will be bringing you each month little-known classics of fantasy by famous writers. The first selection: Robert E. Howard's *Garden of Fear*, a Cananlike tale of a primitive man, his beautiful wife, and the unspeakable evil of the winged man that threatened them in the crowling crimson valley of a lost world.

May FANTASTIC also features a new novelet by Fritz Leiber concerning the further adventures of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, a specimen-hunting adventurer from out of time and space, and several monsters (one of which graces a remarkable cover by a new artist, Vernon Kramer, *I.*)

Plus other short stories, and all our usual features. The May FANTASTIC will be on sale at your newsstand on April 20.

WORLDS OF THE IMPERIUM

(Conclusion)

BY KEITH LAUMER

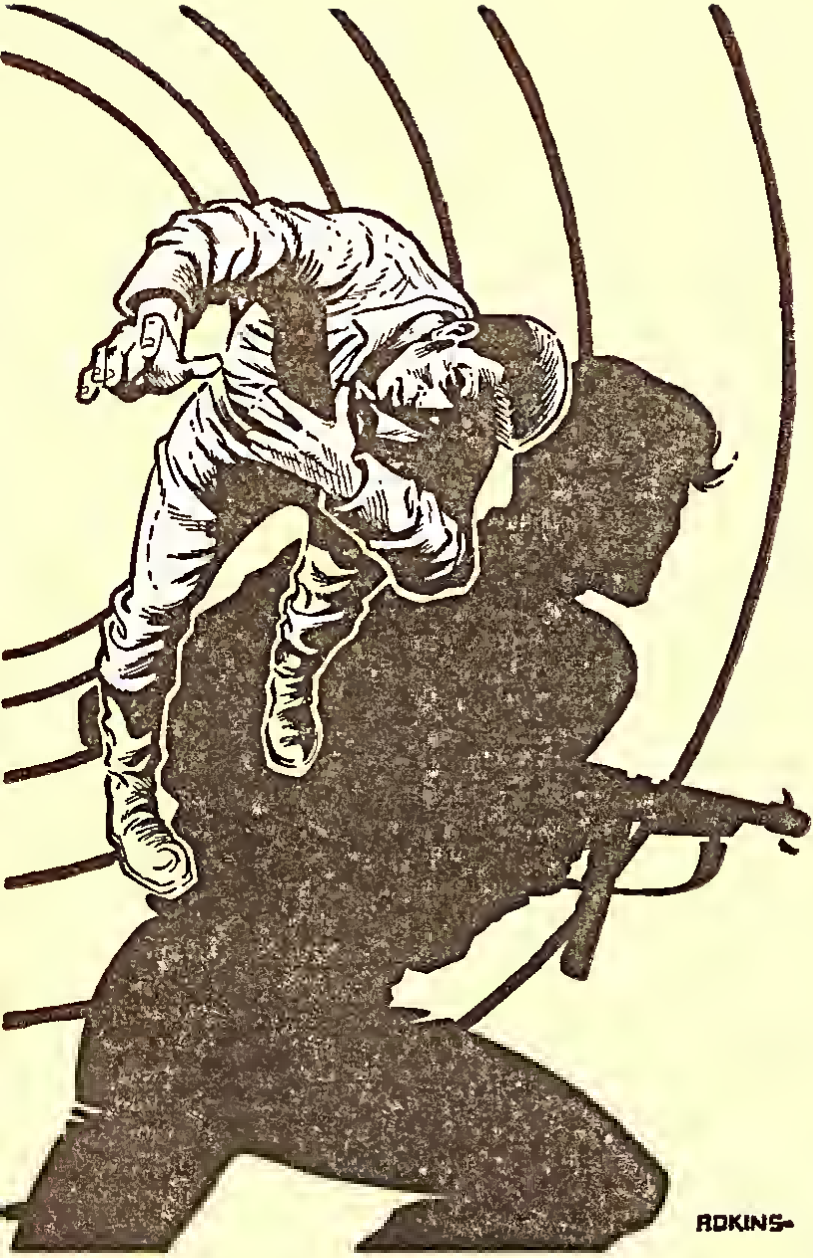
Illustrator ADKINS

SYNOPSIS

Brion Bayard, an American diplomat, finds himself followed through the streets of the medieval section of Stockholm. Cornered, Bayard tries to fight; he is gassed and bundled into the back of a huge van.

Bayard awakens to find himself on a cot in what appears to be an ordinary office except for a




ADKINS

humming sound in the air and a feeling of motion. A man in a dapper uniform tells Bayard in oddly accented British that he is Chief Captain Winter of Imperial Intelligence. Refusing to answer Bayard's demands for releasc, Winter begins an interrogation, as two guards stand by. Bayard controls his anger, plays along in hope of a chance to make a break.

To Bayard's astonishment, Winter proceeds with detailed questioning—about non-existent places and events. Winter, in turn, seems amazed at Bayard's replies.

By luck, Bayard plucks a pistol from Winter's desk, and forces an explanation.

Winter tells him that they are aboard a trans-net scout car, which travels, not through space —or even time—but across the alternative lines which constitute all simultaneous reality, powered by a force acting perpendicular to normal entropy.

Proudly, Winter tells Bayard that he serves the Imperium, a power native to an alternate centinuum in which the discovery of the Maxoni-Cocini drive principle in 1893 gave man freedom to move across the universe of Alternate Worlds. It was soon discovered that the Imperium's World-Line is surrounded by a vast blighted area of dead worlds —the result of unsuccessful experimentation with the field. They are now crossing the Blight, Winter tells Bayard; to stop is impossible.

Only two undevastated A-lines are known within the general Blight area, Winter continues. These are known as Blight-Insular Two and Three, the latter being Bayard's home line. They alone bear a close relationship to the World of the Imperium, having "Common History" dates only a few decades in the past.

Winter then shows Bayard moving pictures taken in the Blight by Automatic cameras; against his judgment, Bayard becomes less skeptical. Convinced the vehicle cannot be stopped safely, he asks what is in store for him when the scout reaches its Imperial base, the zero-zero line. Winter assures him of honorable treatment.

They arrive, emerge into a scene which would have appeared quite normal—except for the gaudy uniforms, the color and pageantry. Bayard is driven in a huge car reminiscent of a WW I Rolls-Royce across the city to a massive granite building, guarded by sentries in cherry colored tunics and black steel helmets with plumes, armed with nickle-plated machine guns. This is the HQ of Imperial Intelligence.

Taken to a sumptuous office,

Bayard is confronted by an astonishing group of Imperial officials. They are introduced as General Bernadotte, the Friherr von Richthofen, and Mr. Goering. Also present is Chief-Inspector Bale, a thin, broad-shouldered man with a small bald head and an expression of disapproval. It requires only a moment for Bayard to realize that Mr. Goering is the double of the infamous Hermann Goering of Nazi Germany—not the same man, but an analog. He realizes now that Winter has not lied . . .

Bernadotte tells Bayard that, using the Maxoni-Cocini field wisely, the Imperium has explored the net and has established friendly relations and mutually beneficial commerce with other A-lines, based on honorably negotiated treaties. Now, he says, the Imperium faces a crisis. Thus Bernadotte seeks to arouse Bayard's sympathy. Bayard is not overly impressed by Bernadotte's reassurances, but is much intrigued; he listens.

Bernadotte explains that with the discovery of B-I Two in 1947, the Imperium held hopes of an alliance with the closely-related world-line—hopes which were blasted when Embassies sent to B-I Two were tortured and killed. Imperial Espionage agents soon learned that the world of B-I Two was a war-devasted waste-land under the control of a ruthless dictator, an ex-soldier with headquarters in North Africa, head of a government known as the National People's State. The agents of the Imperium were withdrawn, and the world of B-I Two was left in isolation.

Then, a year ago, from an unknown quarter of the Net, murderous raids were launched against the Imperium. At last, from a lone prisoner, Imperial Intelligence learned the origin of the raiders; the Imperium's sister world—Blight Insular Two.

How these war-devastated people had managed to harness the Maxoni principle without catastrophe was unknown, but it was clear that they had not had it long. They also possessed a weapon of great power. Bernadotte describes an explosion which had been detonated near Berlin Zero-Zero by a raider; it is apparent to Bayard that it was an atomic bomb.

Then a new factor was introduced. In the heart of the Blight, close to B-I Two and between it and the Zero-Zero A-line of the Imperium, a second surviving line was discovered—Bayard's home world, called B-I Three.

This new A-line was quickly scouted. Its Common History date was set at 1911. At emergency meetings of the General Staff and the Imperial Emer-

gency Cabinet plans were discussed. The result was—all agents in B-I Three were alerted to drop all other lines of inquiry and concentrate on picking up a trace of one man: Brion Bayard.

Bayard conceals his complete bewilderment and waits for an explanation. He senses that Bale, the Secret Service Chief, dislikes him; the others treat him with a friendly courtesy—and a tinge of wary respect. Bernadotte apologizes for the kidnapping. As the others look on silently, he hands Bayard what he says is an official portrait of the Dictator of the world of B-I Two. It is a crude lithograph, in color, showing a man in uniform, his chest covered with medals. Beneath the portrait is the legend:

HIS MARTIAL EXCELLENCY THE DUKE OF ALGIERS, WARLORD OF THE COMBINED FORCES, MARSHALL GENERAL OF THE STATE, BRION THE FIRST BAYARD, DICTATOR.

The picture is of Bayard.

Now it is explained to Bayard that he has been kidnapped with the intention of sending him into B-I Two as an Imperial agent, with the assigned mission of assassinating the Dictator and taking his place. In this way the threat to the Imperium can be met with a minimum of bloodshed. Under the benign control of the Imperium, the world of B-I Two can be rehabilitated. An ideal solution—provided Bayard agrees.

Bernadotte asks for Bayard's cooperation. While for security reasons he can never be returned to his home line, Bernadotte says, his services will be amply rewarded. As a start, an Imperial commission as Major General . . .

Bayard has taken a liking to Bernadotte, but as a professional diplomat he regards the Imperial version of affairs with a healthy cynicism. Nevertheless, the situation appeals to an adventurous streak in his nature. On impulse, he agrees to think it over.

That night, Bayard, in a cheerful mood after a sumptuous dinner with Goering and Richthofen at the latter's villa, attends a gala party at the Summer Palace. He meets Barbro, a beautiful redhead; they are dancing when the side of the ballroom is blasted in—an attack by the raiders of B-I Two. After bloody fighting, the raiders are overcome by the dress sabres of the Imperial officers. Winter is killed; and an unarmed atomic bomb is abandoned in the garden. Bayard realizes the Imperium is in mortal danger.

Chief Inspector Bale, who was not at the party, now appears.

Angered by Bale's patronizing air, Bayard gives him a tongue-lashing, and walks out. Goering who has been very friendly to Bayard, is deeply concerned. He warns Bayard that Bale will challenge him.

Bale challenges Bayard to a duel with pistols; they meet and Bayard, slightly wounded by an illegal shot, knocks Bale down with his fist. Bale is now a mortal enemy. Barbro is much concerned. Responding to the loyalty of his new friends, Bayard decides to accept the assignment.

Ten days later, Bayard, armed with a special miniature pistol, dressed as the Dictator, and briefed on the details of the Dictator's life, is deposited in a corridor of the Ducal palace at Algiers in the Alternate world of B-1 Two. Lying in wait in the Dictator's suite, he is discovered by two of his aides. He tries the deception; they seem amazed, but instantly reject the impersonation. Bayard kills both and flees. In the vaults under the palace he meets members of a cut-throat underground organization. They too are startled at his appearance, but immediately see through his masquerade. They agree to help Bayard. A bruiser named Gaston is assigned as his bodyguard.

Attempting to leave the palace by a secret route, the group is surprised; most of them are killed. Bayard gets through a cordon into the city, but is set upon and brutally beaten by outlaws who dislike his uniform. Gaston finds him, carries him to a hideout in the country. Bayard rests here, recuperating and waiting for the opportunity the Underground has promised him to carry out his assignment; then, by accident, he discovers the reason for the failure of his impersonation: The Dictator has no legs. The Organization plans to correct the defect in Bayard's disguise by a double amputation, before sending him back to the Palace.

Bayard's communicator was smashed in the struggle with the outlaws; he has no chance now but to attempt to escape from the hide-out and to try again alone. He sets out: Gaston intercepts him, but to his surprise follows loyally. They strip and swim the river. After near-capture by the Organization, Bayard commandeers a car, drives a few miles toward the city and pulls off the road to lay his plans.

IX

I GOT out of the car and opened my bundled clothing on the seat. It was still dry. I felt better when I was dressed again. My feet were cut and bruised; I had to ease the socks and shoes on. Gaston was better off.

We pulled the body of the driver out of the car and laid him out in the grass. It was one of the men I had seen at the house, but not the Big Boss. I wondered if that bad been the man who had fired after us. As far as I knew, he was the only one we had left alive.

That was quite a thought. A few weeks ago, I was as mild and inoffensive as any other middle-aged paper-shuffler. Now to get in my way was to die violently. I was learning fast; I had to.

I opened the string bag I had rolled in the middle of my clothing. I was ravenous; I carved slices of ham and bread, and Gaston and I sat in the car and chewed silently.

No cars passed on the road. The night was still black, with no moon. My next problem was to get into the Walled Town. The road led along the river's edge into the heart of the city, according to Gaston. The Dictator's stronghold lay at the edge of the city, north of the highway we were on. He had fortified the area, enclosing shops and houses within an encircling wall like a medieval town, creating a self-sufficient community to support the castle and its occupants, easily patrolled and policed. It was no defense against an army, but practical as a safeguard against assassins and rioters.

"That's us," I said aloud. "Assassins and rioters."

"Sure, chief," Gaston said, swallowing. "Let's go some more."

I backed out, and pulled onto the highway again. There was a glow in the sky ahead. From the road, only a few scattered lights were visible. The countryside seemed almost unpopulated.

Twenty minutes of driving brought us to the bombed-out edge of the city. The rubble stretched ahead, with here and there a shack or a tiny patch of garden. To the right the mass of the castle loomed up, faintly visible in the glow from the streets below it, unseen behind the wall. To the original massive old country house, Bayard had added rambling outbuildings, great mismatched wings, and the squat tower.

I pulled over, cut the headlights. Gaston and I looked silently at the lights in the tower. He lit a cigarette.

"How are we going to get in there, Gaston?" I said. "How do we get over the wall?"

Gaston stared at the walls, thinking. "Listen, Hammerband," he said. "You wait here, while I check around a little." He flipped the cigarette out the window and fumbled at the door. "How do you open these things," he said. "I don't feel no doorknob."


ROKINS

I opened the door for him.

"I'm pretty good at casing a layout," he said, leaning in the window. "I know this one from the inside; I'll find a spot if there is one. Keep an eye peeled for the street gangs." Then he was gone.

I SAT and waited. I rolled up the windows and locked the doors. I couldn't see any signs of life among the broken walls around me. Somewhere a cat yowled.

I checked my clothes over. Both lapels were missing; the tiny set was still clipped to my belt, but without speaker or mike, it was useless. I ran my tongue over the tooth with the cyanide sealed in it. I might need if yet. I thought of the proud face of my red-haired girl, back in Stockholm Zero. I wondered if my failure here would mean the end of her brilliant world of peace and order. Somewhere along the line I dozed off.

The door rattled. I sat up, startled. Gaston's face pressed against the glass. I unlocked it and he slid in beside me.

"OK, Hammer-hand," he said. "Think I got us a spot. We go along the edge of the drainage ditch over there to where it goes under the wall. Then we got to get down inside it and ease under the guard tower. It comes out in the clear on the other side."

I got out and followed Gaston over broken stones to the ditch. It was almost a creek, and the smell of it was terrible.

Gaston led me along its edge for a hundred yards, until the wall bung over us just beyond the circle of light from the guard tower. I could see a fellow with a burp gun leaning against a post on top of the tower, looking down onto the street inside the wall. There were two large floodlights beside him, unlit.

Gaston leaned close to my ear. "It kind of stinks," he said, "but the wall is pretty rough, so I think we can make it OK."

He slid over the edge, found a foothold, and disappeared. I slid down after him, groping with my foot for a ledge. The wall was crudely laid with plenty of cracks and projecting stones, but slimy with moss. I set my foot as well as I could and let myself down, holding onto a knob of rock and feeling for another. Once over the edge, we were out of sight of the guard. I groped along, one precarious foot at a time. We passed the place where the light gleamed on the black water below, hugging the shadow. Then we were under the wall, which arched massively over us. The sound of the trickling water was louder here. I heard Gaston muttering faintly ahead.

I tried to see what was going on. Gaston had stopped and was

descending. I could barely make out his figure, knee-deep in the malodorous stream. I moved closer. Then I saw the grating. It was made of iron bars, and completely blocked the passage. I hung on. My arms were beginning to tremble with fatigue.

I climbed over to the grating. It was better there; I leaned against the rusty iron and tried to ease my arms. The defense system didn't have quite the hole in it we thought it had. Gaston moved around below me, reaching under the surface to try to find a bottom edge. Maybe we could duck under the barrier; I didn't like to think about it.

Suddenly I felt myself slipping. I gripped the bars, stifling a cry. Below, me, Gaston hissed a curse, scrabbled upward. My grip was firm, I realized in an instant; it was the grating that was slipping. It dropped another eight inches with a muffled scraping and clank, then stopped. The rusty metal had given under our weight. The corroded ends of the bars had broken off at the left side. There wasn't room to pass, but maybe we could force it a little farther.

Gaston braced himself against the wall and heaved. I got into position beside him and added my weight. The frame shifted a little, then stuck.

"Gaston," I said. "Maybe I can get under it now, and heave from the other side." Gaston moved back, and I let myself down into the reeking water. I worked an arm through, then dropped down waist deep, chest deep, pushing. The rough metal scraped my face, caught at my clothing; but I was through.

I crawled back up, dripping, and rested. From the darkness behind Gaston I heard a meshing of oiled metal parts and then the cavern echoed with the thunder of machine gun fire. In the flashing light I saw Gaston stiffen against the grating and fall. He hung by one hand, caught in the grating. There were shouts, and men dropped onto the stone coping at the culvert mouth. Gaston jerked, fumbled his pistol from his blouse.

Gaston," I said. "Quick, under the bars . . ." I was helpless. I knew he was too big.

A man appeared, clinging to the coping with one hand, climbing down to enter the dark opening. He flashed a light at us and Gaston, still dangling by the left hand, fired. The man fell over into the stream with a tremendous splash.

Gaston gasped. "That's . . . all . . ." The gun fell from his hand into the black water.

I moved fast now, from one hand-hold to the next, slipping and clutching, but not quite falling somehow. I managed to get a

look back as I reached the open air. Two men were tugging at the body wedged in the opening. Even in death, Gaston guarded my retreat.

I came up over the side, and flattened against the wall, slug-gun in my hand; the street was empty. They must have thought they had us trapped; this side was deserted. I was directly under the tower. I eased out a few feet, and craned my neck; a shadow moved at the top of the tower. There was still one man on duty there. He must have heard the grating fall, and called for reinforcements.

I LOOKED down the street ahead. I recognized the Street of the Olive Trees, the same one I had come through on my way out with Gros, ten days earlier. It slanted down, curving to the right. That was where I had to go, into the naked street, under the guns. I liked it here in the shadow of the tower, but I couldn't stay. I slipped off along the wall, trying to walk quietly. I got about five steps before the searchlight snapped on and swung around. I leaped forward, running for my life. The light found me, burning my leaping shadow against dusty walls and the loose-cobbled street. I tried to guess how many instants it would take the lone man on the tower to leave the light, and get his sights on me. Instinct told me to leap aside. As I did, the gun clattered and slugs whined off the stones to my left. I was out of the light now, and dashing for the protection of the curving wall ahead. The light raked across the street, caught me. Almost instantly the gun broke loose again. I bounded high in the air, twisted, hit and rolled in shadow and was up and running again. The light was still groping as I rounded the turn. Just ahead, a man stepped out of a doorway and spread his arms, crouching. I was moving fast. I stiff-armed him, without breaking my stride. He rolled into the gutter. No lights came on above me; I ran in utter silence. The dwellers in these scarred tenements had learned to sit silent behind barred windows when guns talked in the narrow streets.

I passed the spot where Gros had died, dashed on. In the distance a whistle blew, again and again. A shot rang out, kicking up dust ahead. I kept going.

A newspaper blew along in the gutter. A bristly sewer rat scuttled away ahead. Only the yellow glow of a bare bulb on a tall pole relieved the blackness. My shadow overtook me, leaped ahead.

I heard running feet behind me now. I searched desperately ahead, scanning the shabby stalls, empty and dark, trying to

find the one we bad used the day we left the palace, where the old woman huddled over her table of clay ware. It had been tiny, with a ragged gray awning sagging over the front, and broken pots scattered before it.

I almost passed it, caught myself, skidded, and dived for the back. I fought the stiff tarpaulin, found the opening, and squeezed through.

I panted in complete darkness now. I tried to remember the trip out. This part was just a narrow tunnel, low ceilinged, leading back to the ladder. I started off, feeling my way. I cracked my head on a low beam, crouched lower. Behind me I heard voices, as the men shouted to each other, searching. I had a moment's relief; they didn't know this entry.

I slipped in the slime on the floor, bumped the walls, felt my way around the boulder, and kept on. It couldn't be much farther. It had been only a few steps, I thought, on the way out. I came to a turn, and stopped. There had been no turn in this part of the route. I started back, feelIng the walls on both sides.

I heard a louder shout and a light flashed in the tunnel, near the entrance; someone had found it. I stopped. The light flashed again, and I saw the ladder, set in a niche at the side. I sprang to it, went up it in two leaps, and crashed against the door overhead. It was solid. I gripped the ladder, remembering the bale that concealed it. It had taken three men to push it aside. I climbed up higher, set my feet at the ends of the rung, put my back under the panel, and surged; it lifted, dropped back. The light lanced out, played over the wall below me. Desperately I put one foot on the next rung and heaved, and heaved again. The lid came up, and flew suddenly open. I crawled out onto the floor, blood pounding in my head. Through a blinding haze of pain in my skull, I saw the empty store-room, the open lid. I gripped my head. It felt as though a spike had been driven into it. I rose to my knees in agony, gasping with each heartbeat. I must have busted something, I thought. That bale weighed five hundred pounds.

A light flickered, casting giant shadows on the wall, then a face appeared in the opening where the lid had fallen back. I lay still, wishing that somehow this nightmare could end now, and let me rest.

The fellow's eyes were not adjusted to the darkness; he peered uncertainly around, throwing the light on looming crates and bales, then stared in my direction. With a sudden twist of his body, he brought up an automatic pistol,

and in the same instant I fired the slug-gun once again. I closed my eyes against tbe sight of the face that tumbled back out of sight. The light went out.

I was tired of killing men; that was the one shortcoming of my faithful weapon; it was always fatal.

I got to my feet and groped my way back of a steel lift-van and sank down again. The pain was a little less now, but any movement made it surge up blindingly. I lay there and waited for them to come to me. I couldn't hope to find a better place to make my stand; and I had to have a little time before I could go on.

I could hear the shouts only faintly, rising and falling. After awhile they faded and there was only silence. I raised my head, listening, then rose carefully and went to the open trap-door. All I heard was a drop of water falling with a soft spat below me. I had lost my pursuers.

I FELT my confidence returning. I had been dead, trapped there in the fetid tunnel, and yet somehow I lived. The man wbo had stumbled into the hidden entrance must have done so unobserved, and no one else had looked along that stretch. Probably eacb man had been assigned a portion of the street to search, and the lucky winner had not been missed in the confusion.

I looked at my watch. Tbings happened fast in this war world; it was not yet half past nine. I had left the house at seven. I had killed four men in those two hours, and a man had died for me. I thought how easily a man slips back to his ancient role of nature's most deadly hunter.

The pain was washing away from my head now, leaving me shaky and drowsy. I yawned, sat on the floor. I had an impulse to lie back and go to sleep, but instead I got up and began feeling my way toward the panel that concealed the entrance to the passage in the massive walls. I wasn't finished yet; I was in the palace, unwounded, armed. I had all I had any right to hope for; a fighting chance.

I bumped into things in the darkness, trying to stay on course. I wished I had been more observant on the way out, but then I had no thought of coming back alone. I reached the wall, groped along it. I hoped I would be able to identify tbe panel when I found it. I tapped hopefully, listening for a hollow sound. I wasn't yet ready to start worrying about how I would pass the heavy bolts that held it shut.

The walls sounded solid. I shuffled along, feeling for hinges, cracks, anything to betray tbe false section of wall. There was

nothing. I retraced my steps, wisbing for light, found nothing. I came to a corner, started back. The boards lining the wall were heavy slabs, rough surfaced. I felt nail heads and splinters, nothing else.

I had to have light. I thought of the flashlight the man had been carrying; it was lying at the bottom of the ladder now. It was either that or wait until morning when a little sunlight would filter through the boarded windows. I might as well get going.

I moved off in what I hoped was the direction of the trap door, going slowly, feeling with my feet. I didn't want to find the open door by falling through it. I groped, banged my shins, cracked my head, swore. I cast about, working in the dark with no sound but my own breathing and the scrape of my sboes. I found it at last, when the open lid took the skin off a knuckle as I swung my arms ahead of me.

I felt for the ladder with my feet, went down. At the bottom I tried to avoid stepping on the body by putting my foot down wide of the ladder, and jerked it back as I felt the yielding mass. I swung off on the otber side.

I didn't like the idea, but I reached down and began running my hands over the wet mud floor. There were shallow pools of grit-ty water, and round pebbles, a dead rat, and once something alive that wriggled from under my hand. I felt around the body, and finally under it. It seemed immensely heavy as I dragged it aside, and my head throbbed again. I had to be careful; I had a lot to do before I could relax and be an invalid.

After nearly an hour's search, I found it lying against the wall twenty feet from the ladder. I grabbed it up, flicked the switch, and it went on. The lens was cracked, but the thing worked. I was grateful then for the soft mud of the passage floor.

In two minutes I was back at the wooden wall, flashing the light along the joints. I saw the door almost at once; it was easy if you knew what to look for. I pushed against it; it was as un-yielding as the rest of the wall. I had to have something to work on it with.

I threw the light over the crates nearby, started off among tbem. With any luck, there should be a crowbar here some-where, to pry the lids off the boxes. I prowled up and down the narrow aisles between the looming crates, and among bro-ken board in the far corner dis-covered scattered tools; a nail-puller, heavy pliers, rusty tin snips—and a five-foot pry bar. I was still lucky. That suited me just fine.

AS I pushed the end of the bar into the crack at the side of the door, I wondered what attention the noise would attract. If anyone heard it, it would probably be one of the Organization's stand-by crew, and they knew me. I wasn't too worried, and I had no choice. I heaved, splintering wood.

The big bar worked fast. In five minutes I had a twelve inch board hanging by a few nails at the top. Carrying the steel bar, I lifted the board and slipped under it into the passage. There were no branching corridors to get lost in, I saw. I quickly covered the distance to the door opening onto the room where I had met Miche and Gros. It stood half open. I looked into the room, flashing my light. It was deserted. I wondered where the Organization's men were. I had expected to find someone here.

I stepped past the door, and a rope dropped over my shoulders pinioning my arms. I was hauled backwards, slammed against a table. I threw myself forward, twisting, the light and the pry bar clattering to the floor. The light cast a dim beam toward a distant corner; I couldn't see my assailant.

The rope twisted around my chest now, tightening, and I was jerked back, falling against the table again. This time I was forced down on it, and the rope creaked as it was cinched up under the table, tying me down.

Other ropes flipped across me, pinioning my legs. I fought, kicked, wrenched a leg loose and had it trapped again. There was a rope around my neck now, and for a moment I thought I was going to be choked; but it held at the last instant, leaving me just breathing space.

"You want it tightened up?" a meaty voice grated in my ear. "Just lay nice and quiet."

I got the idea; I lay still. I didn't know whether I was in the hands of the Organization or the Ducal Guard. Maybe if I waited and said nothing, I would find out.

I couldn't see much, only the cobwebbed ceiling. The light moved, flashed in my face. I couldn't see who was behind it.

"It's the stoolie," the voice said unemotionally. "Lots of gall coming back here. What were you after, stoolie, figure on fingering the rest of the boys?"

"Use your head," I said. "I came back here to finish the job I came for; to . . ."

A blow rocked my head. There was a long silence while my head rang. The light went off. Feet shuffled. A match scratched, and the candle gave a weak illumination.

"I seen you kill Miche," the voice said softly. "You're a pretty hard boy, but I put you down.

You look real nice laid out there. I'm going to cut you up a little and then I'm going to see what I can do with the irons. I ain't as good as Miche was with the irons, but Miche would of liked it this way."

"I was almost killed in the ambush myself," I said. I wanted to talk him into letting me go. I didn't want to kill anymore.

There was a sound of a knife being whetted. A shadow moved rhythmically on the ceiling as he stroked the blade across the stone. This one was really nuts, I thought.

My arms were at my sides, held by a rope across the forearms. I worked at the rope, got it up to the elbow. I felt over the other ropes in reach, but there were no knots that I could feel. I wanted to relieve the pressure on my throat, but I couldn't quite reach that high.

"Cut the ropes," I called. "I'm not an informer. I've just come from the place in the country, with Gaston."

The whetting sound stopped. "Where's Gaston?"

I hesitated. "He was killed," I said. "The sentry . . ."

The man laughed, a breathy cackle. "Yeah," he said. "It works out like that, don't it?" His voice hardened. "I'll think about Gaston and Miche and the others while I work with the knife."

So be it, I thought. I twitched my wrist, and the slap of the gun was loud in the silence.

"What's that?" the voice snapped, the chair rasped, feet scraped. The flashlight played across me. My hands were relaxed against the table, the tiny gun held by one thumb against my palm. The light came closer, and I saw the man behind it now, in the faint glow of the candle; grey stubble across a hollow cheek, narrowed eyes, bushy hair. I wanted him to come a little closer. I slapped the table with my left hand; it sounded a little like the other slap.

"You can't blame me for trying," I whined.

He seemed to relax a bit, edged closer. "You was a tricky guy . . ." That was as far as he got. I raised the gun and blew him out like the light in his hand. The thud and clatter echoed and died. I was alone again in silence.

I relaxed then, went limp; all the energy seemed to drain out of me. The temptation to sleep was almost undeniable. But the rope galled my throat, and I had to free myself. I started in, tugging and twisting, working the rope down. I thought of how my reactions had changed in the few weeks since Winter had plucked me from the street in the Old Town. I had been outraged by the brutality of that kidnapping,

had considered myself recklessly daring when I waved the little pistol at my captors.

And now, my strongest reaction when the rope dropped on me in the dark had been the thought that I would have to kill again. Being tied no longer bothered me; I knew I could free myself. The only thought that stirred me was that in a few minutes, with luck, I would face the Dictator in his most inner fortress.

I COULDN'T understand where the rest of the Organization was. This poor mad fellow I had had to kill talked as though he were the only survivor. Maybe the ambush in the Street of the Olive Tree had been followed up by an extermination of the rats in the walls, too.

I worked one arm free, then quickly loosened the rope from my feet and waist; it fell slack around my neck, and I slid from under it. I yawned, then slapped at my face to try to wake myself up. I hadn't slept for forty hours and I had exerted myself in ways I hadn't even thought of for years; I was exhausted.

I went over to Chica's cupboard, rummaged in it, and found a bit of cheese and a bottle of wine. I was thirsty, but the wine would make me even drowsier. I nibbled at the cheese and wondered where Chica was. I hoped she was safe; she seemed like a shy and hopeful girl.

There was no reason to linger here. I crossed to the stair and made my way up to the corridor. The silence was complete until I reached the door which had caused me such consternation when it opened, as I stood at bay at the foot of the hidden stair. I put my ear to the panel, and caught a faint and distant hum of voices, the tiny clatter of things being rattled together. It was the normal hubbub of an occupied household. I felt an unexpected quickening of my pulse; I was sure somehow that I would find the Dictator in residence this time.

I turned the knob and pushed the door open a crack. It grated against a box outside. I forced it six inches, and peered through. There was only darkness, and the sounds, a little louder now. My heartbeat quickened to match the rise in volume. I was nearing my goal. I was no longer the eager neophyte, I thought, ignorant of the realities; I came now, steeled by necessity, a hardened fighter, a practical killer. I was armed and I was desperate, and I bore the scars of combat. I did not intend to fail.

I went up the stairs, pausing at each landing to listen. There was nothing but the sounds of normal activity. I reached the

level of the old roof, and for a moment remembered vividly the other stair that I had climbed in another world, mounting to the tower where my shuttle lay. I didn't linger with the thought. There were no sounds from beyond the door; the latch still hung from splintered wood, just as I had left it when I passed this way coming down. I opened it silently, crossed quickly to the other door from which the private stair led up, and was beyond it, waiting for the sound of any notice I might have attracted. All was quiet; I breathed a sigh, relaxed my tense right wrist. Murdering people is getting to be a chore, I thought.

I yawned, shook my head. I couldn't seem to clear my thoughts fully; I tried to realize that in a matter of minutes, or perhaps even seconds, I might be face to face with my double, my other self, the Dictator of the State. I yawned again.

Forty feet to go, I thought. I went up, passing landings, moving silently. The walls here were smooth and new looking, painted a pale green. The doors were new, of heavy polished wood. Nothing old and shabby would be fitting in the tower apartment of the Dictator.

I reacbed the top, listened again. I eased the door open and looked down the length of tbe hall. This was the first sight I bad seen when the shuttle had pitched me beadlong into this living nightmare. It hadn't changed. I stepped into the hall, tried the first door. It opened, and I saw that it was a bedroom. I went in, and by the faint light shining through the curtains from below, looked over a wide bed, a large desk against tbe far wall, a closet door, an easy chair, and through a partly open door, a roomy bathroom to the right. There was a closed door in the center of the left wall, probably a communicating door to a sitting room, I thought. I closed the door behind me, and crossed to the windows. There were steel shutters, painted light green to match the walls, folded back behind the draperies. On impulse, I closcd them. They fitted well. I went to the desk and found the lamp in the dark, flipped it on. I had had enough of groping through the dark for one night.

The room was very handsome, spacious, with a deep pile grey-green rug and a pair of bold water-colors on the wall. Suddenly I was aware of my own reek. The clothes seemed to crawl on my back. I had lain in mud, waded a sewer, crept through ancient dust. I was filthy. Without considering furtber, I pulled the encrusted tunic off, tossed my clothes in a heap by the door, and headed for the bath.

It was finished in grey-green tile, and the tub was long and deep. I turned the tap, and hot water poured forth. I climbed in, adjusted the temperature, and looked around for the soap. The slug-gun was in my way; I laid it on the floor beside me.

I took half an hour soaping myself, and then climbed out and got my uniform. I had nothing else to put on, and I wouldn't wear it as it was. I soaped it up, rinsed it out, and draped it over the side of the tub. There was a vast white bathrobe behind the door, and I wrapped myself in it and went back into the bedroom. I liked the room; it was what I would like to have for myself, some day. And the thought struck me that we must be much alike in some ways, my twin and I.

I remembered the slug-gun, and retrieved it. The thought penetrated to my dulled mind that I was behaving dangerously. I had no idea when my victim might return; he could have come in when I was naked and helpless in the bathtub. I tried again to shake myself alert. But alarm wouldn't come. I felt perfectly safe, secure, comfortable. This won't do, I thought. I'm going to go to sleep on my feet.

I have to keep active, I told myself. I've got to stay alert. I'll hear him coming, and have a moment to hide in the bathroom. I yawned again.

I sat down in the chair opposite the door, and prepared to wait it out. I got up, as an afterthought, and turned the light out. I don't remember sitting down again.

X

I DREAMED I was at the seashore, and the sun reflected from the glassy water. It flashed in my eyes, and I turned away. I twisted in the chair, opened my eyes. My head was thick.

I stared at the pale green walls of the room, across the grey-green rug. It was silent in the room and I didn't move. The connecting door stood open.

I remembered turning the light off, nothing more. Someone had turned it on; someone had opened the door. I had come as a killer in the night; and someone had found me here sleeping, betrayed by my own exhaustion.

I sat up, and in that instant realized I was not alone. I turned my head, and looked at the man who sat quietly in the chair on my left, leaning back with his legs thrust out stiffly before him, his hands lightly gripping the arms of a rosewood chair upholstered in black leather. He smiled, and leaned forward. It was like looking into a mirror.

I didn't move. I stared at him. His face was thinner than mine, more lined. The skin was burned dark, the hair bleached lighter by the African sun; but it was me I looked at. Not a twin, not a double, not a clever actor; it was myself, sitting in a chair, looking at me.

"You have been sleeping soundly," he said. I thought of hearing my voice on a tape recorder, except that this voice spoke in flawless French.

I moved my hand slightly; my gun was still there, and the man I had come to kill sat not ten feet away, alone, unprotected. But I didn't move. I wasn't ready, not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Are you rested enough" he said, "or will you sleep longer before we talk?"

"I'm rested," I said.

"I do not know how you came here," he said, "but that you are here is enough. I knew that my destiny would not desert me. I did not know what gift the tide of fortune would bring to me, but there could be no finer thing than this; a brother."

I didn't know what I had expected the Dictator Bayard to be; a sullen ruffian, a wild-eyed megalomaniac, a sly-eyed schemer. But I had not expected a breathing image of myself, with a warm smile, and a poetic manner of speech, a man who called me brother.

He looked at me with an expression of intense interest.

"You speak excellent French, but with an English accent," he said. "Or is it perhaps American?" He smiled. "You must forgive my curiosity; linguistics, accents, they are a hobby of mine; and in your case, I am doubly intrigued."

"American," I said.

"Amazing," he said. "I might have been born an American myself . . . but that is a long dull tale to tell another time."

No need, I thought. My father told it to me often, when I was a boy. . . .

He went on, his voice intense, but gentle, friendly. "They told me, when I returned to Algiers ten days ago, that a man resembling myself had been seen here in the apartment. There were two men found in my study, quite dead, a great deal of excitement, a garbled report. But I was struck by this talk of a man who looked like me. I wanted to see him, talk to him; I have been so very much alone here. It was a thing that caught my imagination. Of course, I did not know what brought this man here; they even talked of danger . . ." He spread his hands in a Gallic gesture.

"But when I came into this room and found you here, sleeping, I knew at once that you

could not have come but in friendship. I was touched, my friend, to see that you came here as to your own, entrusting yourself to my bands."

I couldn't say anything. I didn't try.

"There are few in this land who have the courage to stand before me as a man, to treat me as a friend. There are legends of my ferocity, my deadliness, which keep all men on guard in my presence, fear blending with hatred. But they are only legends, born out of the same fear and hatred they engender; the two emotions we know most well in these bitter days. Love and trust —those words—we have all but forgotten.

"When I lit the lamp and saw your face, I knew at once that this was more than some shallow impersonation; I saw my own face there, not so worn by war as my own, the lines not so deeply etched; but there was the call of blood to blood; I knew you for my brother."

I licked my lips, swallowed. He leaned forward, placed his band over mine, gripped it hard.

"Together, my brother, we shall yet redeem a civilization that must not die; you with your whole body, your strong legs, to be everywhere at once; and I with my dream, and the lessons the years have taught me. It is not too late even now to triumph over the petty plotters, the gnawers from within, who seek to bring down the little island of order I have created in the ruins of war; bring it down so that they may loot the ruins, kill the last feeble flower of Western Culture, and give the world over to barbarians."

HE fell silent then, abruptly. He smiled, gripped my hand again, and leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"Forgive me again, brother; I fall easily into oratory, I fear; a habit I should do well to break. There is time enough for plans later. But now, will you tell me of yourself? I know you have in you the blood of the Bayards."

"Yes, my name is Bayard."

"You must have wanted very much to come to me, to have made your way here alone and unarmed. No one has ever passed the wall before, without an escort and many papers."

I couldn't sit here silent, but neither could I tell this man anything of my real purpose in coming. I reminded myself of the treatment the Imperial ambassadors had received at his hands, of all that Bale had told me that first morning in the meeting with Bernadotte; but I saw nothing here of the ruthless tyrant I expected; instead, I found myself responding to his spontaneous welcome.

I had to tell him something. My years of diplomatic experience came to my assistance once again. I found myself lying smoothly, by indirection.

"You're right in thinking I can help you, Brion," I said. I was startled to hear myself calling him by his first name so easily, but it seemed the natural thing to do.

"But you are wrong in assuming that your State is the only surviving center of civilization. There is another, a strong, dynamic, and friendly power, which would like to establish amicable relations with you. I am the emissary of that government."

"Marvelous," he said, "but where?" He leaned forward again, eyes lighting. "There is nothing but silence on the wireless, and reconnaissance as far north as Moscow, east to India, and westward to the sea has discovered to me nothing but ruin and savagery." He sat up. "Of course; America!"

I sought for a neutral reply as he paused, went on.

"I grieved for your country, my brother. It was one of the first and fairest victims of the Age of Madness. You cannot know what gratitude I feel to know that of it something still remains; that the spark was not wholly quenched."

"Humans are tough animals," I hedged. "Not easy to kill."

"But why did you not come to me openly? The course you chose, while daring, was of extreme danger; but it must be that you were aware of the treachery all about me, and feared that my enemies would keep you from me."

He seemed so eager to understand that he supplied most of his own answers. I seemed to be doing pretty well by keeping my comments to a minimum. But this seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of Bale's two agents who had carried full diplomatic credentials, and who had been subjected to beating, torture, and death. It was a contradiction in the Dictator's character I wanted to shed a little light on.

"I recall that two men sent to you a year ago were not well received," I said. "I was unsure of my reception. I wanted to see you privately, face to face."

Bayard's face tensed. "Two men?" he said. "I have heard nothing of ambassadors."

"They were met first by a Colonel-General Yang," I said, "and afterward were interviewed by you personally."

Bayard's face was white. "There is a dog of a broken officer who leads a crew of cutthroats in raids on what pitiful commerce I have been able to encourage. His name is Yang. If he has molested a legation sent

to me from your country, I promise you his head."

"It was said that you yourself shot one of them," I said, pressing the point.

Bayard gripped the arm of the chair, his eyes on my face.

"I swear to you by the honor of the House of Bayard that I have never heard until this moment of your Embassy, and that no harm came to them through any act of mine."

I believed him. I was starting to wonder about a lot of things. He seemed sincere in welcoming the idea of an alliance with a civilized power. And yet, I myself had seen the carnage done by his raiders at the Palace, and the atom bomb they had tried to detonate there.

"Very well," I said. "On behalf of my government, I accept your statement; but if we treat with you now, what assurance will be given to us that there will be no repetition of the bombing raids . . ."

"Bombing raids!" He stared at me. There was a silence.

"Thank God you came to me by night, in secret," he said. "It is plain to me now that control of affairs has slipped from me farther even than I had feared."

"There have been seven raids, four of them accompanied by atomic bombs, in the past year," I said. "The most recent was less than one month ago."

His voice was deadly now. "By my order, every gram of fissionable material known to me to exist was dumped into the sea on the day that I established this State. That there were traitors in my service, I knew; but that there were madmen who would begin the Horror again, I did not suspect. If it is not now too late, I can only ask that you accept my pledge to you and to your government that I will place every resource of this State at the disposal of a force of my most loyal men, a division known as the Ducal Guard, veterans who have been with me since I led them into battle at Gibraltar, on the last day that I stood with my own feet on this earth. They will go with death orders to seek out and destroy those guilty of this monstrousness."

"It is not too late," I said.

He turned and stared across the room at a painting of sunlight shining through leaves onto a weathered wall. "Many times, brother, in these years, I have prayed that it was not too late. Do not mistake me; I prayed to no hollow God of the priests; I prayed to the manhood within myself that I should be able to do what no one else would pause from looting long enough to try; to save what remained of man's accomplishments in the arts, to keep a little

foothold against returning darkness. I fought them when they burned the libraries, melted down the Cellini altar pieces, trampled the Mona Lisa in the ruins of the Louvre.

"There was loot for all, mountains of loot; so many had died and there were whole cities almost intact. Yes, loot is the one thing we do not lack. Destruction seemed to become an end in itself. I could save only a fragment here, a remnant there, always telling myself that it was not too late. But the years passed, and they have brought no change. Instead, it is the people who have changed; they seem to live now only for looting. At first it was a necessity; the survivors of twenty years of war, atomic bombings, disease, starvation, were forced to prowl through the ruins in search of the necessities of life. But there was so much treasure to uncover, so few to divide it among; it became a way of life.

"There was an end to industry, farming, family life. No one has children now. There are no marriages, just casual liaisons; and now they fight over the spoils.

"Even with the plenty that lies about us for the taking, men fight over three things; gold, liquor, and women.

"I have tried to arouse a spirit of rebuilding against the day when even the broken store houses run dry; but it is useless. Only my rigid martial rule holds them in check.

"I will confess, I had lost hope. There was too much decay all around me; in my own house, among my closest advisors, I heard nothing but talk of armament, expeditionary forces, domination, renewed war against the ruins outside our little island of order. Empty war, meaningless overlordship of dead nations. They hoped to spend our slender resources in stamping out whatever traces might remain of human achievement, unless it bowed to our supremacy."

WHEN he looked at me I thought of the expression, 'blazing eyes'.

"Now my hope springs up renewed," he said. "With a brother at my side, we will prevail."

I thought about it. The Imperium had given me full powers. I might as well use them.

"I think I can assure you," I said, "that the worst is over. My government has resources; you may ask for whatever you need; men, supplies, equipment. We ask only one thing of you; friendship and justice between us."

He leaned back, closed his eyes. "The long night is over," he said.

There were still major points to be covered, but I felt sure that Bayard had been grossly misrepresented to me, and to the Impe-

rial government. I wondered how Imperial Intelligence had been so completely taken in and why. Bale had spoken of having a team of his best men here, sending a stream of data back to him.

There was also the problem of my transportation back to the Zero Zero world of the Imperium. Bayard hadn't mentioned the M-C shuttles; in fact, thinking over what he had said, he talked as though they didn't exist. Perhaps he was holding out on me, in spite of his apparent candor.

Bayard opened his eyes. "There has been enough of gravity for now," he said. "I think that a little rejoicing between us would be appropriate. I wonder if you share my liking for an impromptu feast on such an occasion?"

"I love to eat in the middle of the night," I said, "especially when I've missed my dinner."

"You are a true Bayard," he said. He reached to the table beside me and pressed a button. He leaned back and placed his finger tips together.

"And so now we must think about the menu." He pursed his lips, looking thoughtful. "Something fitting for the event," he said.

"And with a bottle of wine, I hope," I said. I was feeling more at ease now. I liked the Dictator Bayard, even if I still had reservations.

"But naturally, brother," he said, staring at me with a smile. "I think I shall be able to offer you something quite adequate in wines." He hesitated. "May I not use your given name? I feel that between us there should be no need for formality."

Now it was my turn to hesitate. "My name is also Brion," I said after a moment. "So we can call each other Brion," I added with a smile.

He laughed. "Splendid. And now let me make a suggestion. Tonight permit me to select the dinner; we will see if our tastes are as similar as ourselves.

"Fine," I said.

There was a tap at the door. At Brion's call, it opened and a sourfaced fiftyish little man came in. He saw me, started; then his face blanked. He crossed to The Dictator's chair, drew himself up, and said, "I come as quick as I could, Major."

"Fine, fine, Luc," he said. "At ease. My brother and I are hungry. We bave a very special hunger, and I want you, Luc, to see to it that our dinner does the kitchen credit."

Luc glanced at me from the corner of his eye. "I seen the gentleman resembled the Major somewhat," he said.

"An amazing likeness. Now;" he stared at the ceiling. "We will begin with a very dry Madiera,

I think; Sercial, the 1875. Then we will whet our appetites with Les Huitres de Whitstable, with a white Burgundy; Chablis Vaudesir. I think there is still a bit of the '29."

I leaned forward. This sounded like something special indeed. I had eaten oysters Whitstable before, but the wines were vintages of which I had only heard.

"The soup, Consomme Double aux Cepes; then, Le Supreme de Brochet au Beurre Blanc, and for our first red Burgundy, Romanee-Conti, 1904."

Brion stared with speculative eyes at the far corner of the room. "Next, Les Quenelles de Veau Benedict, with a Bordeaux; the Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, 1890. By then, I think a Grouse d'Ecosse Rotie sur la Canape would be appropriate, followed by Poireaux Meuniere for a touch of sweet.

"We will have a demi-bouteille of Le Croton '33 then, along with something to nibble; Brie de Meaux, Stilton, and Rocquefort will do.

"Crusted Port, 1871, should clear the palate of cheese in readiness for cafe and Brandy; The Reserve, 1855, Luc. The occasion demands it." He turned to me.

"Among the treasures I was able to rescue from wanton destruction are included what remains in the world of the great vintages. Curiously, the troops usually smashed the wine cellars in disappointment at not having found something stronger. I saved what I could." I was impressed.

"Those old years," I said. "Fabulous!"

"The tragedy is," he said sadly, "that there are no new years. The last authentic vintage year was 1934; a few barrels only. Now the vineyards of France are dead. I am doing what I can here with a few vines, but it is not a thing that interests people today."

LUC went away quietly. If he could carry that in his head, I thought, he was the kind of waiter I'd always wanted to find.

"Luc has been with me for many years," Brion said. "A faithful friend. You noticed that he called me 'Major'. That was the last official rank I held in the Army of France-in-Exile, before the collapse. I was later elected as Colonel over a regiment of survivors of the Battle of Gibraltar, when we had realized that we were on our own. Later still, when I saw what had to be done, and took into my hands the task of rebuilding, other titles were given me by my followers, and I confess I conferred one or two myself; it was a necessary psychological measure, I felt. But to Luc I have always remained

'major'. He himself was a sous-officer, my regimental Sergeant-Major."

"That must have been a terrible time," I said.

"The most terrible part was the realization in recent years that men have changed," he said. "At first, we all seemed to have the same aim; to rebuild. We had to use the only organizing force remaining in our shattered world, military discipline, to make a beginning, to set up some sort of framework within which we could rebuild. I tried, as soon as we had pacified a few hundred square miles, to hold an election. I wished to turn the leadership over to another, so that I could rest and perhaps forget a little; but I almost lost all we had gained in the riots that broke out. I tried twice again in the next ten years, and always the result was the same; bloodshed, a raw struggle for power. So I remain, an unwilling master.

"Now it appears that even that uneasy peace was not long to endure; only your coming will save what we have built."

"I know little about events of the last few years in Europe," I said. "Can you tell me something about them?"

He sat thoughtfully for a moment. "The course was steadily downhill," he said, "from the day of the unhappy Peace of Munich in 1919. Had America come into the war, perhaps it would have ended differently; but of course you know and remember the armed truce of the 20's. America faced the Central Powers alone, and the end was inevitable. When America fell under the massive onslaught in '32, it seemed that the Kaiser's dream of a German-dominated world was at hand. Then came the uprisings. I was only a boy, but I held a second Lieutenant's commission in the Army of France-in-Exile. We spearheaded the organized resistance, and the movement spread like wildfire. Men, it seemed, would not live as slaves. We had high hopes in those days.

"But the years passed, and stalemate wore away at us. At last the Kaiser was overthrown by a palace coup, and we chose that chance to make our last assault. I led my battallion on Gibraltar, and took a steel-jacketed bullet through both knees almost before we were ashore.

"I will never forget the hours of agony while I lay conscious in the surgeons' tent. There was no more morphine, and the medical officers worked over the minor cases, trying to get men back into the fight; I was out of it, and therefore took last priority. It was reasonable, but at the time I did not understand."

I listened, rapt. "When," I asked, "were you hit?"

"That day I will not soon forget," he said. "April 15, 1945."

I stared. I had been hit by a German machine gun slug at Jena and had waited in the aid station for the doctors to get to me—on April 15, 1945. There was a strange affinity that linked this other Bayard's life with mine, even across the unimaginable void of the Net.

At my host's suggestion, we moved out to the terraced balcony and deft men in white jackets spread a table there with fine linen, Swedish glass, and old silver.

Luc came back with the Madiera then, poured it silently, left. We talked, exchanged reminiscences. I limited myself to generalities and in return learned a lot about this lonely man. His parents—our parents—lived at a distance from Algiers; not, as I had been told, because they were estranged from their son, but because he had removed them to a place of safety far from the storm center of Algiers. I thought of seeing them soon, but there was a sense suddenly of unreality about it all.

The courses arrived one by one, wheeled onto the terrace by bustling servitors supervised by Luc, each dish surpassing the last in its perfection. I saw that the Dictator was a gourmet of rare distinction; and Luc was as good as he seemed.

We mellowed with each succeeding bottle of great wine. I hinted, and finally asked Bayard openly about the shuttles, and the M-C drive. He didn't know what I was talking about. Even through the glow I felt the tension begin again inside me; although I had won my way into the palace and the Dictator's friendship, I was still marooned. The raids and the shuttles were under the control of some other hand here. The job of finding that hand still lay ahead.

We were feeling wonderful now. I told Bayard about my escape from the ambush at the bridge and got out my faithful slug-gun to explain to him how it worked. He was enthralled, and asked if they could be supplied to his Ducal Guard. I laid the gun on the table, and showed him the clip on my wrist that flipped the gun into my hand at a motion.

He countered by calling for Luc to bring a heavy walnut gun case containing a beautiful collection of strange automatics, multi-barrelled pistols, and miniature revolvers.

We finished the 1855 brandy, and still we sat, talking through the African night. We laid ambitious plans for the rebuilding of civilization. We enjoyed each other's company, and all stiffness

had long since gone. I closed my eyes, and I think I must have dozed off. Something awakened me.

Dawn was lightening the sky. Brion sat silent, frowning. He tilted his head.

"Listen."

I listened. I thought I caught a faint shout and something banged in the distance. I looked inquiringly at my host. His face was grim.

"All is not well," he said. He gripped the chair arms, rose, got his canes, started around the table.

I GOT up and stepped forward through the glass doors into the room. I was dizzy from the wine and brandy. There was a louder shout outside in the hall and a muffled thump. Then the door shook, splintered and crashed inward.

Thin in a tight black uniform, Chief Inspector Bale stood in the opening, his face white with excitement. He carried a long-barrelled Mauser automatic pistol in his right hand. He stared at me, stepped back, then with a sudden grimace raised the gun and fired.

In the instant before the gun slammed, I caught a blur of motion from my right, and then Brion was there, half in front of me, falling as the shot echoed. I grabbed for him, caught him by the sboulders as he went down, limp. Blood welled from under his collar, spreading; too mucb blood, a life's blood.

He was on the floor, on his back, and I crouched over him. His mouth opened, and he tried to say something; I never knew what it was. He was looking into my face as the light died from his eyes.

"Get back, Bayard," Bale snarled. "Rotten luck, that; I need the swine alive for hanging." I stood up slowly, thinking of the gun on the table behind me.

He stared at me, gnawing his lip. "It was you I wanted dead; and this fool's traded lives with you."

He seemed to be talking to himself. I recognized the voice now, a little late. Bale was the Big Boss. It was the fact that he spoke in French here that had fooled me.

"All right," he said in abrupt decision. "He can trade deaths with you, too. You'll do to hang in his place. I'll give the mob their circus. You wanted to take his place, here's your chance."

He stepped farther into the room, motioned others in. Evil-looking thugs came through the door, peering about, glancing at Bale for orders.

"Truss this man up," he said, jerking his head toward me. "Just his arms."

I stepped back, edging toward the table. If I could have just one shot at that thin-lipped face.

Two of them grabbed at me; I dodged back, turned, reached for the gun. My fingers hit it, knocked it spinning to the floor. Then they had me, twisting my arms behind me.

"I want him put where he'll keep for a few hours," Bale said.

"Yeah," one of the men said. "I know a place; he'll keep good down in them cells over the other side of the shelters; OK we dump him there?"

"Very well," Bale said. "But I'm warning you, Cassu; keep your bloody hands off him; I want him strong for the surgeon."

Cassu grunted, twisted my arm until the joint creaked, and pushed me past the dead body of the man I had come in one night to think of as a brother. He had fought for his cause through bitter years; I hoped he had died before he realized that he had fought in vain.

They marched me off down the corridor, pushed me into an elevator, led me out again through a mob of noisy roughs armed to the teeth, down stone stairs, along a damp tunnel in the rock, and at the end of the line, sent me spinning with a kick into the pitch black of a cell. I fell, groped for a wall for support, found a bare wooden shelf which was the bed, and sat down on it. The iron-barred door clanged.

My stunned mind worked, trying to assimilate what had happened. Bale! And not a double; he had known who I was. It was Bale of the Imperium, a traitor. That answered a lot of questions. It explained the perfect timing and placement of the attack at the palace, and why Bale had been too busy to attend the gala affair that night. I realized now why he had sought me out afterward; he was hoping that I'd been killed, of course. That would have simplified matters for him. And the duel; I had never quite been able to understand why the intelligence chief had been willing to risk killing me, when I was essential to the scheme for controlling the dictator. And all the lies about the viciousness of the Bayard of B-I Two; Bale's fabrications, designed to prevent establishment of friendly relations between the Imperium and this unhappy world.

Why? I asked myself. Did Bale plan to rule this hell-world himself, make it his private domain? It seemed so. Here was a world enough like the world of the Imperium that Bale would have at his disposal the same luxuries and conveniences that he knew at home; he could loot this world's duplicates of the

treasure troves of the cities; stores, palaces and museums.

And I saw that Bale did not intend to content himself with this world alone; this would be merely a base of operations, a source of fighting men and weapons, including atomic bombs. Bale himself was the author of the raids on the Imperium. He had stolen shuttles, or components thereof, and had manned them here in B-I Two, and set out on a career of piracy. The next step would be the assault on the Imperium itself, a full-scale attack, strewing atomic death. The men of the Imperium would wear gay uniforms and dress sabres into battle against atomic cannon.

I wondered why I hadn't realized it sooner. The fantastic unlikeliness of the development of the M-C drive independently by the war-ruined world of B-I Two seemed obvious now.

While we had sat in solemn conference, planning moves against the raiders, their prime mover had sat with us. No wonder an enemy scout had lain in wait for me as I came in on my mission. The wonder was that I'd escaped death on that first step of my journey.

When he found me at the hideout, Bale must have immediately set to work planning how best to make use of the unexpected stroke of luck. And when I had escaped, he had bad to move fast.

I could only assume that the State was now in his hands; that a show execution of Bayard in the morning had been scheduled to impress the populace with the reality of the change in regimes.

Now I would hang in the Dictator's place. And I remembered what Bale had said; he wanted me strong for the surgeon. The wash tub would be useful after all. There were enough who knew the Dictator's secret to make a corpse with legs embarrassing.

They would shoot me full of dope, perform the operation, bind up the stumps, dress my unconscious body in a uniform, and hang me. A dead body wouldn't fool the public. They would be able to see the color of life in my face, even if I were still out, as the noose tightened.

I HEARD someone coming, and saw a bobbing light in the passage through the barred opening in the door. I braced myself. Maybe this was the man with the saws and the heavy snippers already.

Two men stopped at the cell door, opened it, came in. I squinted, at the glare of the flashlight. One of the two dropped something on the floor.

"Put it on," he said. "The boss said he wanted you should wear this here for the hanging."

I saw my old costume, the one

I had washed. At least it was clean, I thought. It was strange, I considered, how inconsequentials still had importance.

A foot nudged me. "Put it on, like I said."

"Yeah," I said. I took off the robe and pulled on tbe light wool jacket and trousers, buckled the belt. There were no shoes; I guessed Bale figured I wouldn't be needing them.

"OK," the man said. "Let's go, Hiem."

I sat and listened as the door clanked again; the light receded. It was very dark.

I wasn't thinking about anything, now. My mind wandered over bits and fragments from the past few weeks; the street where I'd been picked up, the office where Bernadotte had told me about the job, Goering's face as he grappled the raider on the ballroom floor; and Barbro's red hair and level grey eyes.

I fingered the torn lapels of my jacket. The communicator hadn't helped me much. I could feel the broken wires, tiny filaments projecting from the cut edge of the cloth. Beau Joe had cursed as he slashed at them.

I looked down. Tiny blue sparks jumped against the utter black as the wires touched.

I sat perfectly still. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I didn't dare move; the pain of hope awakening against all hope was worse than the blank acceptance of certain death.

My hands shook. I fumbled for the wires, tapped them together. A spark; another.

I tried to think. The communicator was clipped to my belt still; the speaker and mike were gone, but the power source was there. Was there a possibility that touching the wires together would transmit a signal? I didn't know. I could only try.

I didn't know Morse Code, or any other code; but I knew S O S. Three dots, three dashes, three dots; over and over, while I suffered the agony of hope.

A long time passed. I wondered when the surgeon would arrive. Probably Bale had sent to the house in the country for him; it shouldn't take more than an hour and a half, or at most two hours; and surely it had been that long. I had to fight to stay awake now. Fatigue, a beavy dinner, and too much good wine were catching up with me.

My fingers cramped, stiff and aching. It was cold in the cell, and my clothes were still damp. I tapped the wires together and watched the blue spark dance.

I thought of Bayard, holding on alone against the tide of destruction, decay, anarchy, battling to preserve something of civilization out of the ruin of a world; I thought of the gallant

men of the Imperium, facing disaster sword in hand; and I thought of blandfaced men in dowdy grey flannel suits, sitting in embassy offices back in my own world, devising petty swindles, engaging in spiteful office intrigues, little greedy selfish men, feathering their nests.

I knew I didn't have much longer to wait. I went over it again in my mind; it would take perhaps thirty minutes for Bale to get a messenger on the way to the hideout; the trip itself might take twenty minutes. Then allow half an hour to load the table, the instruments—and the wash tub. Another twenty minutes for the return, and then maybe another half hour to set up the operating room. That totalled a little over two hours. My sense of time was confused, but surely it had been that long. I tapped the wires, and waited. I almost fell off the bunk as I dozed for an instant. I couldn't stop; I had to try until time ran out for me.

I heard them coming from far off, the first faint grate of leather on dusty stone, a clink of metal. My mouth was dry, and my legs began to tingle. I thought of the hollow tooth, and ran my tongue over it. The time for it had come. I wondered how it would taste, if it would be painful. I wondered if Bale had forgotten it, or if he hadn't known. I took a breath; there was no reason to wait.

There were more sounds in the passage now, sounds of men and loud voices; a clank of something heavy, a ponderous grinding. They must be planning on setting the table up here in the cell, I thought. I went to the tiny opening in the door and looked through. I could see nothing but almost total darkness. Suddenly light flared brilliantly, and I jumped, blinded.

There was more noise, then someone yelled. They must be having a hell of a time getting the stuff through the narrow hall, I thought. My eyeballs ached. I noticed my legs were trembling. My stomach suddenly felt bad. I gagged. I hoped I wouldn't go to pieces. Time for the tooth now. I thought of how disappointed Bale would be when he found me dead in my cell; it helped a little; but still I hesitated. I didn't want to die. I had a lot of living I wanted to do first. I tried to look at the light again and couldn't.

THERE was a terrible din in the hall now. I thought I heard shots, and I was on my feet again, squinting through the glare. I caught a glimpse of a man backing toward the door, falling. Something was going on out there.

My eyes ached, I shut them,



backed up, trying to think. A voice was shouting nearhy.

There was nothing I could do; I couldn't even tell what was happening. The voice was louder now.

"Wolfhound!"

My head came up. My code name. I tried to shout, choked. "Yes," I eroaked. I jumped to the hars again, yelled.

"Wolfhound, where in hell . . ."

I had my eyes shut. "Here!" I yelled, "here!"

"Over here," the voice shouted. The racket was terrihle now.

"Get back, Colonel," someone said at my head. "Get in the corner and cover up."

I oheyed. I moved hack and crouched, arms over my head. There was a sharp hissing sound, and a mighty blast that jarred the floor under me. Tiny particles bit and stung, and grit was in my mouth. There was a chemical reek and my head hummed. With a drawn-out clang, the door fell into the room.

Arms grahhed me, pulled me through the hoiling dust, out into the glare. I stumhled, trying to blink, and felt broken things under foot.

"Lower the lights," the voice called. The shouts were less now, and the seuffling. I heard other sounds building in the distance; shouts, running feet.

I opened my eyes again, and now it was almost bearable. Men milled around a mass blocking the passage. Canted against the wall a great box sat with a door hanging wide, light streaming out. Arms helped me through the door, and I saw wires, coils, junction boxes, stapled to hare new wood, with angle iron here and there. White-uniformed men crowded into the tiny space; a limp figure was hauled through the door.

"Full count," someone yelled. "Button up!" Wood splintered as a hullet came through.

The door hanged shut, and the box trembled while rumble built up into a whine, then passed on up out of audihility.

Some one grahhed my arm. "My God, Brion, you must have had a terrihle time of it."

It was Richthofen, in a grey uniform, a cut on his face, staring at me.

I tried to smile, I was very weak suddenly. I was too old for this sort of thing.

"No hard feelings," I sald. "Your timing . . . was good."

"We've had a monitor on your band day and night, hoping for something," he said. "We'd given you up, hut couldn't bring ourselves to abandon hope; then four hours ago the tapping started coming through. They went after it with locators, and fixed it here in the wine cellars. Word went out to the patrol

scouts, but they couldn't get in here; no room. We pitched this box together and came in."

"Fast work," I said. I thought of the trip through the dreaded Blight, in a jury-rig made of pine boards. I felt a certain pride in the men of the Imperium.

"Make a place for Colonel Bayard, men," someone said. A space was cleared on the floor, jackets laid out on it. Richthofen was holding me up, and I made a mighty effort, got to the pallet and collapsed. Richthofen said something but I didn't hear it. I wondered what had held the meat-cutters up so long, and then let it go. Thinking was hard work, and now I was going to rest. But I had to say something first, warn them. I couldn't remember. . . .

XI

I WAS lying in a clean bed in a sunny room, propped up on pillows. It was a little like another room I had awakened in not so long before, but there was one important difference. Barbro sat beside my bed, knitting a ski stocking from red wool. Her hair was piled high on her head, and the sun shone through it, coppery red. Her eyes were hazel, and her features were perfect, and I liked lying there looking at her. She had come every day since my return to the Imperium, and read to me, talked to me, fed me soup and fluffed my pillows. I was enjoying my convalescence.

They had let me sleep for twelve hours before Richthofen, Goering, and several lesser lights of the various intelligence services had gathered in my room to hear my report.

They had listened when I told them of my meeting with Bale, and when I finished two of Goering's men left the room at a whispered word from him. I told them all that had happened,—three times. Details that seemed unimportant, Richthofen cautioned me, might be useful; so I left out nothing.

They took the news calmly, I thought. After the others left, I eyed Richthofen quizzically. "You don't seem very surprised to learn that one of your top intelligence men is a traitor to the Imperium," I said.

Richthofen looked serious. "No, Brion, we had begun to fear something of the sort. Inspector Bale has disappeared. He has not been seen for almost a week. We missed him first a day before your signal. We feared foul play, and began an investigation; a number of interesting facts turned up, including several brief disappearances in the past, which had been unreported. With Bale chief of the shuttle service and the patrol ac-

tivities, he could move about freely; no one checked on him. In fact, we bad most of our information on B-I Two through Bale. He could easily arrange matters to suit himself.

"There were also discrepancies in the supplies M-C drive components requisitioned and on hand. Your experience is pretty well borne out by our findings. We found several of his top aides also missing and collected a few others who seemed involved in some odd bits of business."

"That's bad," I said. "I was counting on nabbing him here."

"Doubtless he feared to return, after your escape," Richthofen said. "Perhaps that will be the end of his activities here."

I doubted that. I discussed the measures that might be taken to set up some sort of monitor post in the B-I Two world, to help in eventually reestablishing order there. I felt an obligation to Brion to do that. And I also asked what was being done to bring my parents in. Richthofen reassured me that plans were well under way.

There still remained no solution to the grim threat to the Imperium. Bale was still free to raid at will; only his movement in the ferrying of supplies was impeded by the alerted M-C scouts now under Goering's direction. So far no activity had been reported.

There was nothing more I could do now, Richthofen assured me. Aside from daily visits by him and Goering, one call by the King, whom I still called General, and the soothing and exciting presence of Barbro for several hours each day, I was left alone to recuperate.

IF you are good, Brion," Barbro said, "and eat all of your soup today, perhaps by tomorrow evening you will be strong enough to accept the King's invitation to sit in the royal box and listen to tbe orchestra at the Emperor Ball."

"Did the doctor say tbat?" I asked. "I thought it was just a sort of rhetorical invitation."

The King wants very much for you to come and the doctor says you are making splendid progress. Wouldn't you like to go?"

"And just sit?" I said.

"But I will be sitting with you, Brion."

"OK," I said. "It's a deal."

"I think it will be even better sitting above looking down on the lovely people," Barbro said. "It is the most brilliant ball of the year; the only time that all the three Kings and the Emperor with their ladies are there together. And it is only once in three years that the Emperor Ball is held at Stockholm. I have already been to several, so I will not mind sitting this time to

watch. And we will see more." She bad a lovely smile.

I smiled at her; that was the way she made me feel. "What is the occasion?" I asked.

"It is the anniversary of the signing of the Concord which resulted in the creation of the Imperium," she said. "It is a very happy time."

I was thinking. There seemed to be something I wasn't figuring out. I had been leaving all the problems to the intelligence men, but I knew more than they did about Bale.

I thought of the last big affair, and the brutal attack. I suspected that this time every man would wear a slug-gun under his braided cuff. But the fight on the floor had been merely a diversion, designed to allow the crew to set up an atomic bomb.

I sat bolt upright. That bomb had been turned over to Bale. There would be no chance of surprise attack from a shuttle this time, with alert crews watching around the clock for traces of unscheduled M-C activity; but there was no need to bring a bomb in. Bale had one here.

"What is it, Brion?" Barbro asked, leaning forward.

"What did Bale do with that bomb?" I said, staring at her, "the one they tried to set off at the dance. Where is it now?"

"I don't know, Brion," Barbro said. "Shall I call Baron Richthofen and ask him?" I liked the way she didn't flutter and look helpless.

"Yes," I said, "please do."

I waited impatiently while she got through to Imperial Intelligence, spoke to Manfred. She put the trumpet-shaped earpiece back on its brass hook and turned to me.

"He doesn't know, Brion," she said. "Already an attempt has been made to discover what was done with it, but notbing has been learned."

I had to realize that the Imperial officials still didn't fully understand the bomb's power. But I felt certain that the thing was still here in the Imperium, and tbat Bale would find a way to use it. He could wipe out the city, if the bomb were a big one; and I had an idea it was.

Another thought struck me.

"When do the royal parties arrive for the Emperor Ball?" I asked.

"They are already in the city," Barbro said, "at Drottningholm."

I felt my heart start to beat a little faster. Bale wouldn't let this opporunity pass. With the three kings here in the city, and an atomic bomb hidden somewhere, he had to act. At one stroke he could wipe out the leadership of the Imperium, and follow-up with a full-scale as-

sault; and against his atomic weapons, the fight would be hopeless.

"Call Manfred back, Barbro," I said. "Tell him that bomb's got to be found fast. The kings will have to be evacuated from the city; the ball will have to be cancelled . . ."

Barbro spoke into the phone, looked back at me. "He has left the building, Brion," she said. "Shall I try to reach Herr Goering?"

"Yes," I said. I started to tell her to hurry, but she was already speaking rapidly to someone at Goering's office. Barbro was quick to catch on.

"He also is out," Barbro said. "Is there anyone else . . ."

I thought furiously. Manfred or Hermann would listen to anything I might say, but with their stags it would be a different matter. To call off the day of celebration, disturb the royal parties, alarm the city, were serious measures; no one would act on my vague suspicions alone. I had to find my friends in a hurry; or find Bale. . . .

IMPERIAL Intelligence had made a search, found nothing. His apartment was deserted, as well as his small house at the edge of the city. And the monitors had detected no shuttle not known to be an Imperium vessel moving in the Net recently.

There were several possibilities; one was that Bale had returned almost at the same time as I had, slipping in before the situation was known, while some of his own men still manned the alert stations. A second was that he planned to come in prepared to hold off attackers until he could detonate the bomb. Or possibly an accomplice would act for him.

Somehow I liked the first thought best. It seemed more in keeping with what I knew of Bale, shrewder, less dangerous. If I were right, Bale was here now, somewhere in Stockholm, waiting for the hour to blow the city sky-high.

As for the hour, he would wait for the arrival of the Emperor, not longer.

"Barbro," I said, "when does the Emperor arrive?"

"I'm not sure, Brion," she said. "Possibly tonight, but perhaps this afternoon."

That didn't give me much time. I had to get out of here, do something. I jumped out of bed, and staggered. Barbro stood up quickly and put out her hand to steady me. "Are you sure you are strong enough to get up, Brion?"

"Here I come, ready or not," I said. "I can't just lie here, Barbro. Maybe I can think better if I get outside. Do you have a car?" I was fumbling at my pa-

jama buttons. I had to have some clothes. I started for the closet.

"Yes, my car is downstairs, Brion. Sit down and let me help you." She went to the closet and I sank down. I seemed always to be recuperating lately. I had been through this shaky-legs business just a few days ago, and here I was starting in again. Barbro turned, holding a brown suit in her hands.

"This is all there is, Brion," she said. "It is the uniform of the Dictator, that you wore when you came here to the hospital."

"It will have to do," I said. I didn't bother to be shy about stripping and pulling on the wrinkled clothes in front of Barbro, and she didn't act coy; she helped me dress, and we left the room as fast as I could walk. A passing nurse stared, but went on. I was dizzy and panting already.

The elevator helped. I sank down on the stool, head spinning. I rubbed my chest; it was still sore from Beau Joe's attentions.

I felt something stiff in the pocket, and suddenly I had a vivid recollection of Gaston giving me a card as we crouched in the dusk behind the hideout near Algiers, telling me that he thought it was the address of the Big Boss's out-of-town headquarters. I grabbed for the card, squinted at it in the dim light of the ceiling lamp as the car jolted to a stop.

"Östermalmsgatan 71" was scrawled across the card in blurred pencil. I remembered how I had dismissed it from my mind as of no interest when Gaston had handed it to me; I had hoped for something more useful. Now this might be the little key that could save an Empire.

"What is it, Brion," Barbro asked. "Have you found something?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe just a dead end, but maybe not." I handed her the card. "Do you know where this is?"

She read the address. "I think I know the street," she said. "It is not far from the docks, in the warehouse district."

"Let's go," I said.

We turned away from the reception desk and headed for a small side entrance at the end of the hall. It was a long trip, but I was getting over the dizziness. I had to pause to rest at the door, then made it to the curb. I sat on a stone bench under a linden tree and waited. In less than a minute Barbro swept around the corner in a low-slung red cabriolet. I got in and we swung east, moving fast.

There were few cars on the streets of The Imperium's Stockholm. Ownership of an automobile had not become a national

mania, a caste-mark. We roared across a bridge, rounded into Kungsgatan, cut around an immense green limousine under the bridge, and angled across Stureplan into Biblioteksgatan. An excited policeman blew a whistle, and a trolley jingled a bell indignantly, but we were picking up speed again.

For four days I had idled in bed while somewhere the bomb lay waiting; and now I was forced to leap off on a wild hunch, because there was no time left. If I could have contacted Manfred or Hermann, even checked on the Emperor's arrival time, we could have planned this, prepared for emergency; but now there was only this, a wild dash and a fervent hope that we were right, and not too late.

We squealed around a corner, slowed in a street of gloomy warehouses, blind glass windows in looming brick-red facades, with yard-high letters identifying the shipping lines which owned them.

"This is the street," Barbro said. "And the number was seventy-one?"

"That's right," I said. "This is fifty three; it must be a block "or two farther along."

"Sixty-nine there," Barbro said. "The next one must be it, but I don't see a number." The car eased to a halt.

"Let's get out," I said. I stepped out onto a gritty sidewalk, shaded by the bulk of the buildings, silent. There was a smell of tar and hemp in the air and a hint of sea water.

I STARED at the building before me. I couldn't make out any identifying number. Barbro went around the car, walked a few feet farther on, came back.

"That must be the one, Brion," she said. "The next one is seventy-three."

There was a small door set in the front of the building beside the loading platform. I went up to it, tried it; locked. I leaned against it and rested.

"Barbro," I said. "Get me a jack handle or tire tool from your car." I hated to drag Barbro into this, but I had no choice. I couldn't do it alone.

She came back with a flat piece of steel eighteen inches long. I jammed it into the wide crack at the edge of the door and pulled. Something snapped, and with a jerk the door popped open.

It was dark inside. We went in and I pulled the door shut behind us. A stair ran up into gloom above. A side door opened from the short hall onto a vast space piled with crates. What we wanted must be up the stairs. That would be quite a climb for me. Barbro gave me an arm, and we started up.

We went three flights, a few steps at a time. I was soaked with sweat, and thought seriously about losing my dinner. I sat down and breathed hard through my nose. The hard work helped to keep my mind off the second sun that might light the Stockholm sky at any moment. We went on.

Five flights up, we reached a landing. The door we faced was of red-stained wood, solid, and with a new lock. It looked like maybe we were on to something.

I tried the steel bar again, with no luck. Then Barbro went to work with a long pin with a large sapphire on the end of it. That was no good either. I looked at the hinge pins. They didn't look as good as the lock.

It took fifteen minutes, every one of which took a year off my life, but after a final wrench with the steel bar, the last pin clattered to the floor. The door pivoted out and fell against the wall.

"Wait here," I said. I started forward, into the papered hall.

"I go witb you, Brion," Barbro said. I didn't argue.

We were in a handsome apartment, a little too lavishly furnished. Persian rugs graced the floor, and in the bars of dusty sunlight that slanted through shuttered windows, mellow old teak furniture gleamed, and polished ivory figurines stood on dark shelves under silk scrolls from Japan. An ornate screen stood in the center of the room. I walked around a brocaded ottoman over to the screen and looked behind it. On a light tripod of aluminum rods rested the bomb.

Two heavy castings, bolted together around a central flange, with a few wires running along to a small metal box on the underside. Midway up the curve of the side, four small holes, arranged in a square. That was all there was; but it could make a mighty crater where a city had been.

I had no way of knowing whether it was armed or not. I leaned toward the thing, listening. I could hear no sound of a timing device. I thought of cutting the exposed wires, which looked like some sort of jury-rig, but I couldn't risk it; that might set it off.

Barbro stood behind me. "Brion," she said. "You have found it!"

"Yes," I said, "Here it is; but when does it go up?" I had an odd sensation of intangibility, as though I were already a puff of incandescent gas. I tried to think. We had to get this thing out of here.

"Start searching the place, Barbro," I said. "You might come across something that will give us a hint. I'll phone Man-

fred's office and get a squad up here to see if we can move the thing without blowing it."

I dialed Imperial Intelligence. Manfred wasn't in, and the fellow on the phone was uncertain what he should do.

"Get a crew here on the double," I yelled. "Somebody who can at least make a guess as to whether this thing can be disturbed."

He said he would confer with General Somebody. I yelled some more, but after all, who was I to this bureaucrat? Even here they had a few.

"When does the Emperor arrive?" I asked him. He was sorry, but he was not at liberty to discuss the Emperor's movements. I slammed the receiver down.

"Brion," Barbro called. "Look what's here."

I went to the door which opened onto the next room. A two-man shuttle filled the space. Its door stood open. I looked inside. It was fitted out in luxury; Bale provided well for himself even for short trips. This was what he used to travel from the Home line to B-I Two; and the fact that it was here should indicate that Bale was here also; and that he would return to it before the bomb went off.

But then again, perhaps the bomb was even now ticking away its last seconds, and Bale might be far away, safe from the blast. If the latter were true, there was nothing I could do about it; but if he did plan to return here, arm the bomb, set a timer and leave via the shuttle in the bedroom—then maybe I would stop him.

"Barbro," I said, "you've got to find Manfred or Hermann. I'm going to stay here and wait for Bale to come back. If you find them, tell them to get men here fast who can make a try at disarming this thing. I don't dare move it, and it will take at least two to handle it. If we can move it, we can shove it in the shuttle and send it off; I'll keep phoning. I don't know where you should look but do your best."

Barbro looked at me. "I would rather stay here with you, Brion," she said. "But I understand that I must not."

"You're quite a girl, Barbro," I said.

I WAS alone now, except for the ominous sphere behind the screen. I hoped for a caller, though. I'd better get ready for him. I went to the door which leaned aslant against the rough brick wall outside and unlatched it, maneuvered it into place and dropped the pins back in the hinges, then closed and relatched it.

I went back to the over-stuffed room, started looking through drawers, riffling through papers on the desk. I hoped for something, I didn't know what; something that might give a hint of what Bale planned. I didn't find any hints, but I did find a long-barrelled twenty-two pistol, and a tiny thirty-two, tucked away under clothing in a dresser drawer. The twenty-two was a revolver, loaded. That helped. I put it in my pocket and tossed the automatic under the couch. I hadn't given much thought to what I would do when Bale got here; I was in no condition to grapple with him; now I had a reasonable chance.

I picked out a hiding place to duck into when and if I heard him coming, a storeroom in the hall, between the bomb and the door. I found a small liquor cabinet and poured myself two fingers of sherry.

I sat in one of the fancy chairs, and tried to let myself go limp. I was using up too much energy in tension. My stomach was a hard knot. I could see the edge of the bomb behind its screen from where I sat. I wondered if there would be any warning before it detonated. My ears were cocked for a click, or a rumble from the silent grey city-killer.

The sound I heard was not a click; it was the scrape of shoes on wood, beyond the door. I sat paralyzed for a moment, then got to my feet, stepped to the storeroom and eased behind the door. I loosened the revolver in my pocket and waited.

The sounds were closer now, gratingly loud in the dead silence. Then a key scraped in the lock, and a moment later the tall wide figure of Chief Inspector Bale, traitor, shuffled into view. His small bald head was drawn down between his shoulders, and he looked around the room almost furtively. He pulled off his coat, and for one startled instant I thought he would come to my storeroom to hang it up; but he threw it over the back of a chair.

He went to the screen, peered at the bomb. I could easily have shot him, but that wouldn't have helped me. I wanted Bale to let me know whether the bomb was armed, if it could be moved. He was the only man in the Imperium who knew how to handle this device. I thought of holding a gun on him, and forcing him to disarm it; but I had learned that that only works in the movies. He could easily be fanatic enough to set it off instead, if he knew his plot had failed.

I watched him. He leaned over the bomb, took a small box from his pocket, and stared at it. He looked at his watch, went to the phone. I could barely hear his

mutter as he exchanged a few words with someone. He went into the next room, and as I was about to follow to prevent his using the shuttle, he came back. He looked at his watch again, sat in a chair, and opened a small tool kit which lay on the table. He started to work on the metal box with a slender screwdriver. This, then, was the arming device. I tried not to breath too loud, or to think about how my legs ached.

Shocking in tbe stillness, the phone rang. Bale looked up startled, laid the screwdriver and the box on the table, and went over to the phone. He looked down at it, chewing his lip. After five rings it stopped. I wondered who it was.

Bale went back to his work. Now he was replacing the cover on the box, frowning over the job. He got up, went to the bomb, licked his lips and leaned over it. He was ready now to arm the bomb. I couldn't wait any longer.

I pushed the door open, and Bale leaped upright, grabbing for his chest, then jumped for the coat on the chair.

"Stand where you are, Bale," I said. "I'd get a real kick out of shooting you."

Bale's eyes were almost popping from his bead, his head was tilted back, his moutb opened and closed. I got the impression that I had startled him.

"Sit down," I said, "there." I motioned with the pistol as I came out into the room.

"Bayard," Bale said hoarsely. I didn't say anything. I felt sure now that the bomb was safe. All I had to do was wait until the crew arrived, and turn Bale over to them. Then we could carry the bomb to the shuttle, and send it off into the Blight. But I was feeling very bad now.

I went to a chair, and sank down. I tried not to let Bale see how weak I was. I leaned back, and tried breathing deep through my nose again. If I started to pass out I would have to shoot Bale; he couldn't be left free to threaten the Imperium again.

It was a little better now. Bale stood rigid, staring at me.

"LOOK, Bayard," he said. "I'll bring you in on this with me. I swear I'll give you a full half share. I'll let you keep B-I Two as your own, and I shall take the Home line; there's plenty for all. Just put that gun aside. . . ."He licked his lips, started toward me.

I started to motion with the gun, squeezed the trigger instead. A bullet slapped Bale's shirt sleeve, smacked the wall. He dropped down into the chair behind him. That was close, I thought. That could have killed him. I've got to hold on.

I might as well impress him a little, I thought. "I know how to use this pop gun, you see," I said. "Just a quarter of an inch from the arm, firing from the hip; not bad, don't you agree? Don't try anything else."

"You've got to listen to me, Bayard," Bale said; "Why should you care what happens to these popinjays? They've kidnapped you, sent you off into danger, and offered nothing in return except a scrap of paper. Don't you see they're all using you, making you a tool in their game? They've filled you full of rubbish about the glorious Imperium. Well, I propose to bring it down with raw power; the power of that bomb. I can use power as well as the next man; and I'll share it all with you. We can rule as absolute monarchs . . ."

Bale went on, but I was thinking. Why indeed should I fight for the Imperium? I wasn't sure I could answer that. I only knew that I believed in its high purpose, and its decency, and the courage and *elan* of its people. I had wanted something that I could give my loyalty to without reservation. I had given years of my life to the service of my own country, back in the sickly twilit world I came from. I had seen the shabbiness, the pettiness, the trivial venality, and I had tried to believe in my service in spite of what I saw. In the end I had resigned rather than go along; and the granite walls of the Embassy chancery could not have looked down on me more coldly than my ex-colleagues on the day I left them. I wondered if I were merely dramatizing myself; but nothing could change the facts that I remembered; the duty I had tried to do, and the ease with wbich the little crooked men had prevailed.

Here I found men like Winter, who had died without hesitation when he saw that his duty demanded it; Richthofen and all his crew, who had ridden a haywired rig into the borror of the Blight, to keep faith with a man from another world; and Barbro, the incomparable . . .

You could laugh at them if you wished, a cynical laugh at gaudy uniforms, and hereditary titles, and pomp and ceremony; the laugh of the smugly unillusioned at the bright romantic; but no one could laugh at the officers who had charged with sabres into machine-gun fire at tbe attack on tbe palace, or the women who had stood their ground behind them.

I didn't have to explain; I didn't have to apologize. This world of the Imperium had won my loyalty, and I would fight for it to the death against a narrow maniac like Bale.

". . . take one moment, and we're off. What about it?"

Bale was looking at me, with a look of naked greed. I didn't know what he had been saying. He must have interpreted my silence as weakness; he got up again, moved toward me. It was darker in the room, I ruhhed my eyes. I was feeling very had now, very weak. My heart thumped in my throat, my stomach quivered. I was in no shape to be trying to bold this situation in check alone.

Bale stopped, and I saw that he suddenly realized that I was blacking out. He crouched, and with a snarl jumped at me. I would have to kill him. I fired the pistol twice, and Bale reeled away, startled, but still standing.

"Hold on, Bayard, for the love of God," he squealed. He saw that I was still alive enough to kill him. I raised the pistol, aimed again and fired. I saw a picture jump on the wall. Bale leaped aside. I didn't know if I had hit him yet or not. I was losing my hold, but I couldn't let him get away. I fired twice more, peering from my chair and I knew it was the light in my mind fading, not in the room. Bale yelled; I saw that he didn't dare to try for the door to the hall or the room where the shuttle waited. He would have to pass me. He screamed as I aimed the pistol with wavering hands, and dived for tbe other door. I fired and heard tbe sound echo through a dream of blackness.

I WASN'T out for more than a few minutes; I came to myself, sitting in the chair, the pistol lying on my lap. The screen had fallen over, and lay across the homh. I sat up, panicky; mayhe Bale had armed it. And where was Bale? I remembered only that he had dashed for the next room. I got up, grabbed for the chair again, then got my halance, made my way to the door. There was a strange sound, a keening, like a cat in a distant alley. I looked into the room, half expecting to see Bale lying on the floor. There was nothing. The light streamed through an open window, and a curtain flapped. Bale must have panicked and jumped, I thought. I went to the window, and the keening started up again.

Bale hung hy his hands from the eave of the huilding across the alley, fifteen feet away. The sound came from him. The left leg of his trousers had a long stain of hlackish red on it, and drops fell from the toe of his shoe, five stories to the hrick pavement helow.

"Good God, Bale," I said. "What have you done?" I was horrified. I had heen ready to shoot him down, hut to see him hanging there was something else again.

"Bayard," he croaked, "I can't hold on much longer. For the love of God . . ."

What could I do? I was far too weak for any heroics. I looked around the room frantically for an inspiration; I needed a plank, or a piece of rope. There was nothing. I pulled a sheet off the bed; it was far too short; even two or three would never make it; and I couldn't hold it even if I could throw it and Bale caught it. I ran to the phone.

"Operator," I called. "There's a man about to fall from a roof. Get the fire department here with ladders, fast; seventy-one Östermalmsgatan, fifth floor."

I dropped the phone, ran back to the window. "Hold on, Bale," I said. "Help's on the way." He must have tried to leap to the next roof, thinking that I was at his heels; and with that hole in his leg he hadn't quite made it.

I thought of Bale, sending me off on a suicide mission, knowing that my imposture was hopeless as long as I stood on my own legs; of the killer shuttle that had lain in wait to smash us as we went in; of the operating room at the hideout, where Bale had planned to carve me into a shape more suitable for his purpose. I remembered Bale shooting down my new-found friend and brother, and the night I had lain in the cold cell, waiting for the butcher; and still I didn't want to see him die this way.

He started to scream suddenly, kicking desperately. He got one foot up on the eave beside his white straining hands; it slipped off. Then he was quiet again. I had been standing here now for five minutes. I wondered how long I had been unconscious. Bale had been here longer now than I would have thought possible. He couldn't last much longer.

"Hold on, Bale," I called. "Only a little while. Don't struggle."

He hung, silent. Blood dripped from his shoe. I looked down at the alley below and shuddered.

I heard a distant sound, a siren, howling; whoop, whoop. I dashed to the door, opened it, listened. Heavy footsteps sounded below.

"Here," I shouted, "all the way up."

I turned and ran back to the window. Bale was as I had left him. Then one hand slipped off, and he hung by one arm, swinging slightly.

"They're here, Bale," I said. "A few seconds . . ."

He didn't try to get a new hold. He made no sound. Feet pounded on the stairs outside, and I yelled again.

I turned back to the window as Bale slipped down, silent, his

(Continued on page 130)



According to you...

Dear Editor:

Fantastic is pretty good as of late, but I echo the cry of many for "more fantasy". Preferably in the *Unknown* vein. I have managed to find two copies of that much-lamented treasure, and wouldn't part with them for anything. If you could just recapture the flavor—a couple of times it looked as though you were about to, what with Fafhrd and Grey Mouser running again, but each time you backslid. I know, it's hard to find good fantasy—but *try*, why not?

David G. Hulan
132 Goss Circle
Redstone Arsenal, Ala.

• *See the Coming Next Month announcement on page 77. How's that for quick action?*

Dear Editor:

Three cheers for "A Plague of Masters", one of the best novels I've read lately. However, lest I sound corney, why, after all the work Anderson does to bring Flandry and Luang together does he have to go and change the hero's character? I had hoped all along that those two would wind up together, but in the end he leaves her flat.

Mike Ungerman
P.O. Box 5035
University of Rochester
Rochester 20, N.Y.

• *Flandry's motto is love 'em and leave 'em. How else can an Imperial Operator operate?*

Dear Editor:

No one can say you haven't started this year out right with your January issue of *Fantastic.* The new logo is splendidly catching, and the recently attached byline, Stories of Imagination, puts the finishing touch on a rosplendent cover by that old come-back, Alex Schomburg.

The stories were better than ever. I particularly enjoyed "The Reality Paradox" by Daniel F. Galouye. And "Dr. Blackadder's Clients" by Arthur Porges was one of the best he has written in a long time; the problem of the fourth client (disposing of his wife) was most interesting.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

• *Problems of wife-disposal, we find, always are high on our readers' lists of interests. Does this mean anything? Or are we reading our own thoughts into this?*

Dear Editor:

I haven't written a letter to you for some time and I usually don't unless I have something important to say, either praise to you or gripe with you. Well, this letter is a gripe. I noticed you printed a Mr. Michael Padgett's letters in two *Amazings*, December and January issues and two of his letters in August and December *Fantastic.* Who is he, the Publisher's nephew or someone special? I am not complaining because you didn't print any of my letters, I couldn't care less whether you do or don't, but how about not printing Padgett's letters so much and print someone else's letters for a change!

Larry Wright
3625 Elmwood Ave.
Kansas City, Mo.

• *All right, already.*

Dear Editor:

This letter is written in reference to the short story entitled "Degree Candidate," which appeared in the January 1961 edition of your magazine.

I am aware that a certain amount of poetic license must be taken by science fiction writers beyond that taken by other types of writers,

owing to the speculative and highly imaginative nature of science fiction. But there is a certain sense of decency (which is not necessarily confined to questions of pornography) which has been violated by this story.

The Candidate in the story is named "Jav" wbich bears a strong resemblance to the Hebrew name of the Judaeo-Christian Deity, and the development of the story gives no doubt that the author has equated this candidate with all the Gods mankind has ever known and worshipped (at least he is fair about the whole thing: the story is an insult to all religion, rather than any one in particular). Thus equated, the candidate is depicted as capricious, sadistic, lazy, and finally unsuccessful, which is the main insult to the religious beliefs of a great part of our population.

The kindest thing that can be said about this work is that it is in poor taste, although it would be more accurate to say that it is blasphemous (not, sad to say, subject to the same laws as is pornography.) I do not mean to impugn the religious views of the author, but I might suggest that in the future you have more of a decent regard for the beliefs of many who still regard the Judaeo-Christian God as divine (and for others as well).

In a free, democratic nation, the man who wrote the story under tbe name of "Peter Arthur" is, of course, perfectly free to write whatever he pleases, within certain broad limitations, and unfortunately blasphemy is not included in these limitations. The editors of a magazine with a large circulation, however, have certain responsibilities to their public, and a decent regard for the religious feelings of many of them seems to be one of your responsibilities. Surely you have enough contributing authors that you do not need to antagonize many of your readers by publishing literary trash like "Degree Candidate."

I hope that this will be the last poor article in an otherwise excellent magazine.

D. R. Bivens
H & S Co. 2nd Tank Bn. FMF
Camp Lejeune, N.C.

● *This is the only letter we have received commenting on this story—and thus the only one to accuse us of blasphemy. To speculate on the origins of religion does not seem to us to be blasphemous —at least not since the Spanish inquisition ended.*



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Worlds of the Imperium

(Continued from page 125)

tie fluttering gaily over his shoulder. I didn't watch. I heard him hit—twice.

I staggered back, and the burly men called, looked out the window, milled about. I made my way back to the chair, slumped down. I was empty of emotion. There was noise all around me, people coming and going. I was hardly conscious of it. After a long time I saw Hermann, and then Barbo was leaning over me. I reached for her hand, hungrily.

"Take me home, Barbo," I said.

I saw Manfred.

"The bomb," I said. "It's safe. Put it in the shuttle and get rid of it."

"My crew is moving it now, Brion," he said.

"You spoke of home, just now," Goering put in. "Speaking for myself, and I am sure also for Manfred, I will make the strongest recommendation that in view of your extraordinary services to the Imperium you be dispatched back to your home as soon as you are well enough to go, if that is your wish. I hope that you will stay with us. But it must be for you to make that decision."

"I don't have to decide," I said. "My choice is made. I like it here, for many reasons. For one thing, I can use all the old cliches from B-I Three, and they sound brand new; and as for home." I looked at Barbo:

"Home is where the heart is."

THE END

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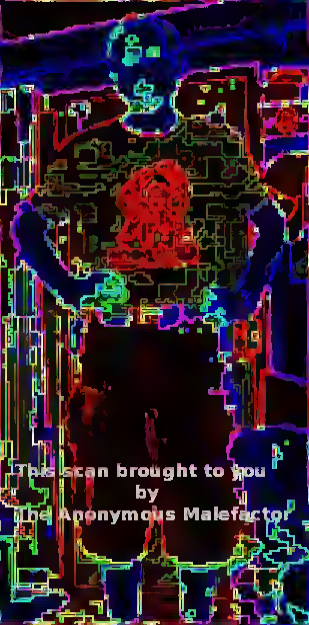
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